

Mindfulness: Life in the Present (un) Tense

Gelassenheit!

The first time I heard this deliciously Teutonic word spoken, I figured someone must have sneezed VERY vociferously to warrant such an eloquent response.

Sneezed, indeed! —That primordial expression of surrender, letting go, being out of control. Yielding to a power beyond the intellect (“I don’t know why I’m sneezing.”) even beyond the will (“I’m trying NOT to sneeze!.”)

Curious it is that a word with such a German-engineered sound would actually so well express the far-from-technical art of listening and surrendering to the ineffable Mystery of God.

I say “art” because the experience of contemplation, of allowing for what Burghardt and McNamara call the “Long, Loving, Look at the Real” is more complex than a physical or intellectual exercise—although, like the other life experiences that truly end up shaping us, this yieldedness



the first duty of love is to listen

Paul Tillich

to the divine is something developed with intention and exercise.

INTENTION

Intention? I won’t stake my etymological reputation on this (easy to give up something you don’t have, isn’t it!!) but I’m betting that the “English” word we use for that experience of “everything coming together,” of “gelling,” is the root of Gelassenheit. OK—I’ve done the digging—it IS the root of the word, and no surprise. Although it may be difficult to discern the

chicken-egg order here (does surrendering let us feel like there is some kind of gelled CP (Cohesive Plan) out there, or does thinking there is a Plan help us surrender?) I think it’s fair to say that it’s easier to surrender to something when we see it a part of a bigger plan, as one element in the larger composition.

The Gelling of Small Things

I’m out of orange juice this morning. I have to go to the store. I’m on a deadline with this editor—I shouldn’t have to be interrupted.

This sucks.

Or not.

I'm supposed to be writing this essay, indeed—but it's for a magazine dedicated to people with a ministerial orientation, who have, like me, chosen a career, a life path which is, in the end, committed to being present in the moment of God's Grace. Does God's grace somehow evade the corner store? Or the hills, houses and homeboys on the way there? I think not. Do I not believe with Heschel that "something sacred is at stake in every event?" This orange juice crisis is no accident—it's a wake-up call from the Big Waker: "My dear and misguided Rob, Mr. Writer, Mr. Artist, Mr. Music Guy—give it up! Make words, you will, make art, you will, make music, you will—but you are not what you make. You are my inestimably cherished child, and would be just as much so if you were the clerk at the store, or the kid on the corner (who should be in school, but apparently would rather smoke weed behind the bus stop), or the migrant worker who picked the oranges for your juice! Is this your 'Great Temptation,' innocently arrogant one, that the Universe is held together by YOUR activity? No wonder you're so tired. And so thirsty."

"Now—hush, Beloved, take a breath. Let me in, take the weight of control off your shoulders, and get on your bike and get that juice."

"But my editor needs this article on Monday!"

"And your point is??? Listen, sweetly dense Creation of mine---Yes, this fragile world needs what you do. It's why I gave these gifts to you. But you need to know that MY plan is bigger than yours. You'll get the article done, and the weekend liturgies, and the romance and the Pappi time with your kids and theirs. But it will be on MY time, not yours. You, now sit down 'cuz this may shock you: YOU are NOT driving this engine here. Be still, and know that I am God."

I'm not the first person to have had this conversation with God, to be sure. Maybe the slowest on the uptake, but not the first!

“Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by the One who is the great listener, and whose work they should share. We should listen with the ears of God, that we might speak the Word of God.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The trick seems to be allowing for the luxury of wasting time with God. Walking in and

with that unanxious presence. As St. Ignatius of Loyola put it so simply, being quietly attentive enough that I might Find God in all things. Not just the things that I'VE assigned to God (how nice of me, yes!!--?) like sunsets, a lover's chiseled cheek bone, my child's smile. But, in the mundane, the less than "perfect" (Ahh, now THERE'S a dangerous word!)

No accident it is that, with all that artists, writers, philosophers, theologians, mystics and students of life may dispute, there is one thing upon which most, if not all, will agree: the journey to that state of gelling, that place of contemplation, begins not with action, but with stillness. Not with demonstration, but with reflection. Not with an outline, but with a blank slate. And not with a stop watch, but with the gentle ebbing and flowing of an hour glass.

In this stillness we not only contemplate, but we begin to build relationship, as Paul Tillich so aptly reminds us in his admonition: The first duty of love is to listen.

In his *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* Pieper refers to this lack of activity, this stillness, as not only good for the personal soul, but, echoing the ideas of Heidigger, necessary for the development of society. This attentiveness, combined with continual reflection and regeneration follows the



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Antoine de Saint Exupery

Rob Grant

Socratic dictate of living the examined life, and is the simple basis of Christian spirituality.

The purpose of this attentiveness is not to focus on the self, an exercise that can easily lead to a narcissistic and vacant life. Nor is the intent to “self-actualize” in the mode of achieving goals and personal objectives. Rather, the goal is a personal awareness that, through attention, noticing and probing, places us not as the center of the query, but at the all-embracing heart. A place where the REAL is seen, not merely the ACTUAL. As Antoine de Saint Exupery so artfully expressed this centering: “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

Christ is the exemplar par-excellence of this human competence, this ability to center and be attentive to the real. At the root of this competence is his willingness to make time for the solitude necessary as a foundation to building and securing his personhood BEFORE performing his ministry of service.

Richardson treats this heartfelt attentiveness as the three-steps of the therapeutic process: uncovering, discovering, and recovering. In personal, familial and institutional relationships, this “noticing” allows for the movement from anxiety to calm, separateness to togetherness, distance to closeness, and, conversely, from unhealthy fusion and reactivity, to differentiation.

Through the attentiveness of contemplation, and the awareness of therapy, one can move from with rejecting the false self of roles, (“I am what I do”) to identifying the actual self of emotional nakedness, and embracing the real self, God’s Intention of the unique and concretely singular ME. And, in that movement, meet the challenge of Switzer: “To be competent helpers....we must also be competent human beings.”

By taking the time, the stillness to be aware of the temptations we face in the desert and in the “real” world, we can follow suit and come to see with the heart, the true self, not the false self measured by the scales of success, popularity, relevance and power.

This discernment of the true self leads to an understanding of the importance of context, and with context, the notions of community and of time.

There are two ways to view time: the

action-motion-centered view, Time of Man (Chronos), and the contemplation-stillness-centered view, the Time of God (Kairos). These definitions do not compete with, but, rather, complement each other. It is in understanding the distinction between, and the linking of, these views that an individual recognizes the true significance of each moment, and that a culture and society can move beyond the instincts of temporal SELF preservation to the yearnings of a timeless and deeper evolution, both personal and communal.

As Ignatius of Loyola so wisely understood 500 years ago, “It is precisely because God is present to life and available to human experience that we have a divinely inspired story to tell, and that the story once told is revelation.” And, as de Chardin echoed so eloquently as a scientist of the 20th century: “The world becoming luminous from within, as one plunges breathlessly into human activity.” In the 18th century, between Ignatius and Chardin, we had the wisdom of William Blake: “To see a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower, hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, and Eternity in an hour.” And such understanding is far from being owned solely by Christians. In his Living Buddha, Living Christ, Thich Nhat Hanh defines contemplation as “Looking deeply at life as it is in the very here and now.”

This breathless plunging through actual time into REAL time will not always lead to consolation. Indeed, it may take us into the deepest desolation. But the journey deep into and fully through both places is essential. The REAL at which we look long and lovingly may not be always as pretty as Blake’s wildflower, but it will be as beautiful. In this evolution from merely seeing, to looking and finally, perceiving, comes Truth, and from that, comes Grace. And with Grace, the ability to move from solitude to community, from personal faith to service.

As Switzer reminds us in Pastoral Emergencies, and Kubler-Ross in all her writings on death and dying, there is often a process through which we move from Chronos to Kairos, from merely seeing, to perceiving--- a process of Shock ==Denial== Bargaining==Depression== and, finally, in the healthiest of scenarios==Acceptance.

Ahhh—acceptance----“Thy will be done.”

No accident it is that the in the signature prayers of all the Great Traditions, the Pater of Christianity, The Allahu Akbar of Islam, the Baruch Adonai of Judaism the Dharmic Chant of Buddhism and the Namaste of Hindism, there is the awareness of surrender to a divinely ordained order inherent in all creation. Acknowledging and surrendering to

this order, adopting a non-anxious presence as we walk through the times of ease, and the times of discomfort is the key to happiness, the secret to the fullest human experience of life. The discipline of discerning this Will of God through reflection and contemplation is not about separating ourselves from the world, but of fully embracing it, seeing, as did Teresa of Avila, that “The human life fully lived is the glory of God.”

EXERCISE

To where do these thoughts on attentiveness and stillness and integration of the Sacred Real and the Holy Unanxious lead this pastoral minister?

First, to humility. I must be among the noisiest, unstill people I know—not in volume of sound I produce, but in the volume of activity I crave. Ahhh, I’ve had this awareness of my penchant for eschewing the substance of stillness (or is it the stillness of substance!) in favor of the thrill of activity MANY times. Advent usually gets me focused, and Lent, and thank God for Holy Week (redundant, yes!!) But, like the proverbial New Year’s resolution, I have managed to let the commitment slip away.

From humility, to prayer—at once the thing I need, and the thing which will get me to the thing I need.

I have a friend from India, a racquetball partner, who, weeks ago before he was to travel home on business, asked me if there were anything he could bring me back from Bombay when he returned. Return, he has—and with my requested present: a prayer mat. A simple contemplative tool that I have strategically placed in my bedroom. Not in some sacred corner, no. That would be all too easy to avoid!! Rather, it lays, like a seductress, on the floor directly alongside my bed, so that, each morning, the VERY first thing my feet touch as I slither out of slumber is this reminder that I am hungrier for more things than a breakfast smoothie.

It has become my first poustinia, my simple lover’s lair where I can dismiss the din of my home/ office and revel cross-legged in wasting time with God. I want to be a poustinik!!

It is where, this morning, I prayed this prayer:

Ever- present God,
as I begin this day, help me to pay attention,
to be truly present in every moment.

Present to my loved ones, my friends, my
colleagues. Those people closest to me, those most
likely to irritate me.

Invite me to see the You that is in them.

The divine within the mundane.

The timeless within the temporal.

The grace amidst the chaos.

I know this to be your intention for all your
Creation.

May it be mine today.

...And where, as I sat before taking my evening
rest, I prayed:

Ever-giving God,
As I close my eyes tonight,
may I hold the gentle recollection of all the graces
that have fallen my way today.

Where I have watched,
and my attentiveness has brought me joy,
may this rest I now fall into give me comfort.

Where I have watched, and my attentiveness
has caused me pain, anxiety, a sense of helplessness,
may this rest I now fall into give me strength to
continue when I rise in the morning

Where I have not watched, may I be more attentive
tomorrow.

I commend all those whom you have sent to me today
to your care this night. I join them in the peace of
your loving embrace.

G’Night, you know me so well, and still love me.

Knowing well my over-activity proclivities, I have committed to claiming another poustinia—the sanctuary of my favorite church, Notre dame des Victoires, where, before I minister (with no choir or ensemble to attend to—YAY!) at the 5:30 Mass on Sunday, I can, in the calm of the nearly vacant nave an hour before the service, forget that I am the minister, and remember that I am the seeker, the pilgrim, the Beloved who has ears to hear the whisperings of my Suitor.

And, yet more exercises, I have reframed the Marist Order's week retreat in Dallas for which I've been engaged to lead musical prayer, and the week I've been hired to teach at the National Pastoral Musicians convention as NOT assignments for me to work, but as assignments for me to be worked on.

Even as I move from my various poustinia, I know I will continue wrestling with the elemental contemplative questions: Am I comfortable, or even willing, to be listening, not talking? Being, not doing? Loving, not working? Praying, not deciding? Discerning, not strategizing? Seeing the God who is, not the God who I'd like to be?

And so, my task today? This week, this month? This Spring? This lifetime? To nurture within myself, within my relationships and, from that foundation, within my ministry, an openness to stillness, to inactivity, the serendipitous grace of the moment. And to clearly grasp the reality that my personal spiritual healthiness is the elemental and irreplaceable foundation of my ability to minister to others.

In this intersection of intention and exercise, practice and presence, I can move from the model of task and objective to true spiritual growth personally, and in ministry to others.