A Contemplative Response to Pastoral Dread

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Abstract

Pastors and church leaders often experience a vague feeling of apprehension as they carry out their pastoral functions in the performance-evaluative atmosphere of their congregations and denominations. If this feeling leads to an intensified chronic anxiety, they might question their ministerial calling and their ability to lead others in spiritual growth and mission. Drawing upon the concept of dread offered by Søren Kierkegaard, this essay explores the existential promise of dread to raise foundational ontological questions. A contemplative practice is especially helpful to gently distinguish false from true ways of being and to live more fully into the divine vocation of spiritual leadership.

A Personal Journey into Dread

Feelings of pastoral dread came to my attention when I returned in December 2008 from a second tour in Iraq as a chaplain in the Army National Guard. I had spent the previous year with the troops leading worship and pastoring soldiers where ultimate issues of life and death were very real. I counseled people who had killed and refrained from killing and felt guilty of the consequences. I led memorial services of fallen comrades. I struggled to proclaim a message of hope and meaning, in the meaninglessness of war. Having all these intense experiences, I returned home to resume spiritual leadership for a congregation in my denomination, The United Methodist Church.

At the very first Administrative Council meeting, energy crackled among the members as they couldn't wait to share their excitement. I was elated and ready to hear their hopes, wishes,

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and dreams for spiritual growth and mission. Yet, the important topic they wanted to share was—purchasing new pew cushions. I was crestfallen. Meanwhile, the rest of the council absorbed their excitement and develop a plan to see this project through.

Having dealt daily with the exigencies of life and death, now I was discussing the details of pew cushions. I wish I could say I offered them a prophetic critique of their plans and led them to pursue a more excellent way. Alas, I did not. The banality of their desires and of my inadequate response crushed my spirit.

Each time I drove into the church parking lot for a committee meeting, I debated with myself whether or not to pull the door handle and open myself to the situation. And each time I did, something within me withered. I thought the problem was within me, so I hired a nationally known church growth consultant. He told me both of my congregations most likely would not be able to "turn around." They were in a death spiral and would not grow. I felt like a failure, and I knew my future appointments would be based on my ability to meet the quantitative expectations of my superiors. A crisis of confidence arose within me.

Dread can mean several different things. A typical dictionary definition of dread is "to fear greatly" or "to feel great reluctance."[1] From a psychological perspective, dread identifies closely with anxiety, which the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* characterizes as "a psychic response of dread or fear to a vague, unspecified threat."[2]

Initially, dread registered in me as a vague feeling of apprehension when I faced certain pastoral tasks and functions. For instance, I particularly loathe finance committee meetings. A profound resistance accompanies that task. But more generally, pastoral dread indicated a peculiar angst in face of the unknowns in my pastoral vocation: What will congregational life look like

[1] Merriam-Webster, Inc. *Merriam-Webster's Intermediate Dictionary*, (Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster,) 2011.

[2] Rodney J. Hunter, ed., *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 47. This work will be referred to as DPCC throughout the rest of this praxis-thesis.

in twenty years? Will my ministry in the congregation have any lasting significance? Will I be able to reverse the decline of this congregation?

Later, a third meaning emerged: pastoral dread seemed to connote a deep aching or instinct that something in the practice of pastoral ministry was not right. For instance, the model of congregational ministry that sees the congregation as a religious organization that ought to be growing in resources and in participation even in the midst of denominational decline did not sit right with me. I had always resisted the recent preoccupation of leading congregations to have a mission statement, vision statement, a set of values, and measurable outcomes for the sake of numerical growth. These things were not necessarily bad, but they did not represent the reasons I had given myself to pastoral ministry. It was this incongruence between my ideals and the expectations of others that seemed to evoke pastoral dread.

When I began to interview some colleagues along these lines, my hunch that others might be experiencing something similar proved correct. Although our contexts differed, as well as our backgrounds and personalities, each person resonated with the term pastoral dread. There were things in their ministry contexts they were apprehensive about. They also shared a vague unease about the future viability and significance of the current expression of congregational life. And they shared a common disconnect between their current work context and their personal hopes and dreams for ministry.

I came to think that pastoral dread might have to do with something more fundamental, with what Paul Tillich called "the anxiety of emptiness."[3] The anxiety of emptiness is the experience of feeling passionate about a particular issue but finding one's pursuit of that issue frustrated by a particular group or culture. One's promising hope or belief is not realized. Over time the passion dissipates, the original vision fades, and we find ourselves without foundation, substance, or purpose.

[3] Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 47.

Not only are pastors struggling mightily with vocational discernment, but the rhetoric of crisis in the Church make it worse. United Methodist polity scholar Thomas Frank has observed that the "rhetoric of crisis takes power away from laity and pastors by diminishing the significance of their work—they who meet week after week in sanctuaries all across the landscape to worship God."[4] All the important day-to-day actions of pastoral care and mission in the congregation and community seem worthless if the bottom line of increased membership and giving is not achieved. The rhetoric of crisis and the degradation of the pastoral vocation evokes feelings of dread in many congregational leaders.

The Revelatory Force of Dread

The Concept of Dread is a seminal analysis by Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard. Our understanding of Kierkegaard's concept of dread is complicated because it is based on the German word, angst, and there is little consensus about whether *angst* should be translated "anxiety" or "dread." I will follow Gregory R. Beabout and his excellent analysis of Kierkegaard's concept of angst. For Kierkegaard the structure of human being is bipolar: mind and body.[5] A third factor unites these two poles: the spirit.[6] Beabout explains, "the Spirit is the power of the will to self-consciously relate the two poles of the synthesis to one another and hence to the self."[7]

As we mature, generally we grow in the capacity for the mind and body to relate vis-à-vis the spirit. We develop self-reflection, which allows for a whole host of ontological distinctions in our existence to come to mind. Self-reflection not only distinguishes "I" from "you" but also between "now," "past," and "future";

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[4] Tillich, *The Courage to Be,* 47.

[5] Kierkegaard's actual language is "soulish" for the mind, and "bodily" for the body. Other commentators, as Beabout does, use the words "psychical" and "physical" accordingly.

[6] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 35.

[7] Gregory R. Beabout, *Freedom and its Misuses: Kierkegaard on Anxiety and Despair* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee University Press, 1996), 46.

between "being" and "not being"; between "finitude" and "infinity." According to Kierkegaard, it is the spirit's capacity for self-relation that cultivates our awareness of ourselves not only *in* space and time, but also of the infinite possibilities that the future holds.

One of Kierkegaard's great contributions to our understanding is to point out the deep and resonate ambiguity within our experience of dread, as a feeling of both attraction and repulsion. "The person who looks over the edge of the cliff feels anxious; there is both the dizzying feeling that one might fall with its accompanying repulsion and a quietly felt urge to lean out farther, to leap."[8] There is a quality of sweet apprehension and shrinking danger in the experience of dread in the moment. The human spirit is more or less attracted or repulsed at all possible possibilities, responding with either "sympathetic antipathy" and "antipathetic sympathy."[9] "One speaks of a sweet dread, a sweet feeling of apprehension, one speaks of a strange dread, a shrinking dread."[10]

Our relationship to the future has a bipolar structure. We stand in each moment between two infinite horizons: the limitless freedom of life's potential choices and the unfathomable darkness of our nonbeing. The more we become cognitively aware of this bipolar ontology, the more dread-full our experience becomes. The more self-reflective we are, the more aware we become of the limitless potentiality before us on the one hand, and on the other, of our inevitable death, our nonbeing. Both infinite horizons threaten us with "too much." The inconceivable immensity of both horizons literally blows our minds: The immensity not only titillates but also overwhelms our egos; limitless freedom excites and threatens our fragile sense of self.

Our perception of self-negation first arises in infancy. Theologian and developmental psychologist James E. Loder claimed that ego first arises when an infant notices that the presence—perceived in the "face"—of the parent is not permanent. Up to this time, the face has served as the orienting principal for the infant. Gradually,

[8] Beabout, *Freedom*, 47.
[9] Kierkegaard, *Concept of Dread*, 38.
[10] Ibid.

and perhaps all too suddenly, the infant comes to experience the inner pain of the absence of the face. This perceived absence and initial experience of the void gives rise to the ego as the infant's first negation of that absence, that primordial void. Over a lifetime the ego creatively navigates all types of existential conflicts that threaten its agency. "Void" can serve as a term for anything that negates us from either of the infinite horizons: limitless possibility and inexorable demise. Anything that threatens our sense of self-determination is a face of the Void, which Loder defined as the "ultimate telos toward which all experiences of nothingness point."[11]

Because the infinity of the future is an unpreventable reality in our ontology, manifesting in innumerable forms, the ego—the psychic agency of oneself—nevertheless strives valiantly to negate those negations. Loder described the ego as "a kind of tragic hero who appears to slay the dragon of nothingness."[12] It develops strategies and patterns of negating our negation, of repressing all indications of our limitations and death.

Loder criticized traditional developmental psychologies because they tend to offer therapies in only two dimensions: the lived world and the self. We constantly seek to therapeutically change the future either by changing external circumstances or our capacity to experience external circumstances. Inevitably, we try to "diffuse the painful inner-sense that being human is empty and meaningless by proliferating meaningless activity to the cheers of an equally self-alienated society."[13] According to Loder, one of the most common ego defense mechanisms is *pursuing achievement* to satisfy the pain of both near-term and ultimate negations.

The Illuminative Potential of Pastoral Dread

Dread always has an ambiguous relationship with the future. We can either face the infinity of the future with courage or we can try to avoid the implications through all manner of ego defenses. Usually, we end up doing a little of both.

[11] James Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989), 70.
[12] Loder, *Logic of Spirit*, 135.
[13] Loder, *Logic of Spirit*, 82.

With these distinctions in mind, we can clarify pastoral dread as the ambiguous relationship with the future in the context of pastoring congregations. Dread is universal. Pastoral dread is contextual. Dread deals with possibilities and choices, and pastoral dread deals with possibilities and choices within the environment of leading congregations.

In early 2011, I decided to give in. I came to grips with the notion that if I ever was going to get a chance to move to a congregation that felt more passion for the poor than for pew cushions, then I was going to have to grow my congregations to get some street cred with the district superintendent and bishop.

I led each congregation to adopt the official mission statement of The United Methodist Church as its mission statement. We adopted a vision to grow our worship attendance, and it doubled. We moved to a single-board model that simplified the governance structure. And despite these achievements, when I drove into the parking lot to attend the one meeting once a month, I still opened the door handle with a deep weariness. Something inside me withered a little more.

If dread is "What is becoming of me?" then pastoral dread is "What is becoming of me as a pastor called to ordained ministry?" Spiritual theologian Elaine Heath expanded the existential question of pastoral authenticity to include the responses of the Church to its spiritual and cultural malaise:

> Here in the spiritual desert, in the night of increasing aridity, God's people search through all the familiar patterns, activities, choices, and ways, all the old options that used to provide a sense of religious stability, of spiritual meaning. We think about all the ways we worked to get people to join the church and realize that often what we really wanted was enough money in the offering to pay the utility bills. We sift through the labels we have used to define our own and others' religious identity: liberal, conservative, fundamentalist,

> saved, unchurched, Spirit-filled, carnal, Pentecostal, Bible-believing, middle of the road, orthodox. "Is this what it means to be the church?" we ask ourselves.[14]

Pastoral dread arises in the heartfelt rumination on the substance of Heath's question. As pastors, we will look at all the mundane activities and strivings within congregational leadership and ask "Is this all there is?" to our vocation. In this respect, *feeling dread intensely and responding to it courageously has the potential to lead us into a deep, spiritual exploration of who we are in God and what we are called to do*. Standing before the abyss of our self-constructions, we just might glimpse the Holy One who has been there all along and calls us beloved.

Pastors are not immune to chasing after the programs of happiness, seeking security, affection, and power in the exercise of the pastoral vocation. On a functional level, we are often rewarded in these areas through our pastoral strivings. Yet, on an ontological level, the dread of living between inauthentic expectations and one's authentic self remains. In time, the feeling of dread intensifies, and we are issued a new invitation by that very dread to let go of that to which we cling for our salvation.

The spiritual life is one of undulating seasons, of cyclical surrendering and dying. Contemplative writer Phileena Heuertz described it: "The process a tree goes through during the changing seasons…is slow and dry and brutal to the leaves. The leaves are forced to die. Does the tree resist…or surrender to the process in the hope that new life will come?"[15] Pastoral dread extends an invitation to surrender to the process of purging ourselves of all that inhibit us from living from our true center. The journey, however, is fraught with struggle. "We want the fruit, but we resist the dying."[16]

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[14] Elaine Heath, *Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 34.
[15] Phileena Heuertz, *Pilgrimage of a Soul* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 122.
[16] Heuertz, *Pilgrimage*, 122.

Not only do we experience the inner resistance to dying, the external system in which we participate resists dying as well. The United Methodist Church, and most other denominations, is in decline. Many of our leaders resist this fact ardently, for institutional decline threatens our collective needs of security, esteem, and power. As a denomination we seek to fix the lived world by making our pastors more effective. We know we need creative "adaptive responses," but we give in to the temptation of quick-fix technical solutions.[17]

Heath reframed the decline of The United Methodist Church in the contemplative tradition. She claimed the present time is really a dark night of the soul for the Church. She wrote:

> Many Christians view the decline of Western Christendom with alarm, as if God had fallen from heaven. Enormous effort is put forth to launch church growth programs to shore up membership, increase giving, and keep denominational ships afloat. But the history of God's people is a history of life cycles, a history of clarity about call and identity, followed by complacence, followed by collusion with the powers, followed by catastrophic loss. Contrary to being a disaster, the exilic experiences of loss and marginalization are what are needed to restore the church to its evangelistic place. On the margins of society the church will once again find its God-given voice to speak to the dominant culture in subversive ways, resisting the powers and principalities, standing against the seduction of the status quo. The church will once again become a prophetic, evangelistic, alternative community, offering to the world a model of life that is radically "other," life-giving, loving, healing, liberating. This kind of community is not possible for

[17] Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

> the church of Christendom. Christendom opposes prophetic community with its upside-down power and its exposure of golden calves.[18]

In other words, institutional decline can be undertaken as a spiritual test, a spiritual opportunity for a divinely inspired purification, in which God graciously strips the Church of her false attachments.[19]

The unique nature of the pastoral vocational and institutional context sets up a particularly potent dynamic between dread and anxiety. Pastors understand their call to be from God and affirmed by the faith community. Pastors are called to deal with issues of ultimate significance such as life and death, alienation and belonging, sin and forgiveness, and the limitless responsibility and freedom to act wisely and compassionately.

During their pastoral formation they are asked to articulate and give evidence of how they understand themselves to be called by God into ordained ministry. I believe that through this pastoral formation process that one's sense of call becomes extremely entwined with one's sense of self. Moreover, unlike a call to be a pharmacist or plumber, the pastoral call is perceived, if mistakenly, to be bound up in our relationship with God, the source of life. When our perception of call is threatened, our relationship with God is threatened.

Pastor Vashti Jackson has been in pastoral ministry for over fifteen years. She was ordained in another Pan-Methodist tradition. However, she serves as an associate pastor at a large United Methodist congregation, St. Barnabas, which is primarily comprised of African Americans. Pastor Jackson is in her early 40s. She has been serving at St. Barnabas since 2010. She is African American.

I asked Pastor Jackson about how much of her self-identity

[18] Heath, *Mystic Way*, 26-27.

[19] I am not calling for separation from religious institutions and their systems, but rather calling for a new system. Just as we are not transformed by a God separate from us, the only possibility is through finding transformation from the Spirit within us, and living out of that transformation into a new system.

is wrapped up in her call to ministry. She responded, "There are not too many hats I wear that I let pigeonhole me, but the call to ministry is one of them."[20] She reflected on how she acts in public and in private is a part of that pastoral identity. "I feel like I am always Pastor Jackson. It does define me."[21]

Many pastors would echo Pastor Jackson's sentiment. There is a close connection between a sense of call to ordained ministry, a sense of self-identity, and one's ability to carry out the responsibilities of pastoral ministry in the areas of word, sacrament, service, and order. For each of the interviewees of my research, their anxiety in pastoral ministry revolved primarily around meeting expectations of others. Pastor Phil Majors commented, "Most of my anxiety comes from the performance model of ministry where the pastor is the primary performer."[22] For Pastor Majors, preaching was the locus of pastoral dread in which his singular performance felt "like a fraud." "Performance brings up feelings of 'I'm not good enough'; if I know congregants don't like me that bugs the hell out of me!" He then went on to describe that he took his anxiety home and how it adversely affected his wife and his marriage.

The context of pastoral dread and anxiety is larger than congregational ministry. I am an elder within the United Methodist denomination and a citizen within an increasingly secular society. A rhetoric of crisis suffuses conversations within all types of Christian organizations, striving to reverse numerical decline in worship attendance, professions of faith, and financial giving.

> The bind for many pastors is that leading change in their congregations for the primary purpose of increasing quantitative metrics would violate their sense of pastoral integrity. For example, the "Call to Action" report of The United Methodist Church says that "vital" congregations use praise bands in the

[20] Vashti Jackson, personal interview by author, November 5, 2012.
[21] Vashti Jackson, personal interview by author, November 5, 2012.
[22] Vashti Jackson, personal interview by author, November 5, 2012.

> context of contemporary worship.[23] Contemporary worship is not inherently right or wrong. Yet, for some pastors and their congregations, the practice of contemporary worship would not be authentic for the pastor or the congregation. And thus, we have a conflict between authentic spiritual expression and the pressure to conform and perform. Moreover, if the pastor's performance does not lead to improved metrics, their vocation of ordained ministry might be jeopardized. Consequently, pastors face the quandary that leading with spiritual integrity might not meet performative expectations, which calls their pastoral identity, future livelihood, and vocational calling into question.

Dread and Performative Expectations

In his book, *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences*, Richard Roberts points out that Christian universities and denominations face increasing threats to their financial and social viability. To address these threats, many missionally driven institutions strive for sustainability by imposing a managerial Performative Absolute[24] upon otherwise self-governing, values-oriented people:[25]

> The "Performative Absolute" is an all-consuming, all-seeing, yet self-concealing power that feeds on identity, which it digests and then regurgitates as a troubling reality for those who have the organizational misfortune to owe some form of allegiance to values or to a sublime that would appear to exist external to the vision and demands of management.[26]

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[23] "Call to Action: Steering Team Report" (Nashville: The United Methodist Church, 2010).
[24] Richard H. Roberts, *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: University Press, 2002), 3.
[25] Roberts, "Contemplation and the 'Performative Absolute" 17.
[26] Roberts, "Contemplation and the 'Performative Absolute" 17.

The Performative Absolute seeks to replace personal and vocational identity with a managed identity "composed of those skills, competences and behavioral characteristics deemed appropriate to current organizational needs."[27]

Many pastors feel they are being asked to lead congregations in ways that are rooted more in reversing the numerical decline of the denomination than in being faithful to the call of the Gospel. Institutional management tends to evaluate its clergy less on the depth of call and faithfulness in living out that call, and more in terms of ability to increase particular metrics that reflect denominational and congregational vitality. If we succumb to this pressure to perform, and if our value derives from effective performance, we will be oriented falsely and will be serving a god of our own making.

The Contemplative Call to the True Self

The contemplative tradition often describes the spiritual journey in terms of a struggle between the false self and the true self, "the image of God in which every human being is created; our participation in the divine life manifested in our uniqueness."[28] Spiritual development is thwarted by the "false self," as a defensive ego that protects itself from being overwhelmed by infinite possibility or by its own negation. If acting falsely, the ego typically strives to avoid the implications of transcendent potential or the emptiness of absence by repressing the Void and seeking happiness in one of two ways: either "gratifying the instinctual needs of survival/security, affection/esteem, and power/control;"[29] or identifying "with a particular group from whom it can find acceptance and thus build feelings of self-worth."[30] We tend to identify with a particular group, and adopt its performative imperatives, because

[27] Roberts, "Contemplation and the 'Performative Absolute" 21.
[28] Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 148.
[29] Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 2.
[30] Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 2.

that group promises ego satisfaction by meeting one of these over-identified instinctual needs.[31]

Professor Elaine Heath described the false self this way:

> The false self is universal to the human experience, arising from wounds received in life. Overwhelmingly focused on production, performance, and making the desired impression on others, the false self constructs protective armor. The false self confuses identity with function, so that we think we are what we do. The false self is a Pelagian who believes that everything is on his or her own shoulders.[32]

In other words, we carry within us a false self that is formed by the wounds received in our development; and we create a form of existence that seeks to limit further damage. I have argued that pastoral anxiety happens when the threat of loss, and particularly the loss of pastoral identity, becomes so magnified that one's sense of power and freedom diminishes. In our anxiety we seek to diffuse the intensity of anxiety typically through better performance or giving up. The false self focuses on reducing anxiety by manipulating circumstances rather than engaging the void directly and receptively.

I confess that I confirmed my pastoral call mostly in terms of my congregation's financial and attendance metrics. I had dreams of motivating people to change their lives and change the world into a better place. My primary points of reference for pastoral identity were largely external and oriented to what other people do and what they expect of me. In this way, I am an idolater. But I also confess I do not want to be an idolater. I want to learn to resist the temptation to judge myself on what I do; I want to learn to value who I am at a fundamental level. Moreover, I confess I believe the contemplative tradition's claim that at a fundamental level I am beloved of God.

[31] Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 187.
[32] Heath, 82.

Yet, there is a final confession: This fundamental truth of who I am is obscured and hidden from much of my consciousness by false attachments. These attachments, and the external pressures that sustain them, are what must die. Phileena Heuertz believes this is exactly the point of spiritual growth: "The contemplative tradition is about learning to die well."[33] That is, the desire to avoid facing our deepest needs and pain must die so that the ontological reality of our union with the Trinity can unfold into our lived existence.

The Contemplative Journey into Our True Self

The contemplative journey, as a particularly illuminative path of spiritual growth, offers a theological framework and a practice intentional openness to God's transformational power. From a contemplative perspective, transformation means one moving away from operating primarily from a false self to the true self, which is grounded in its larger, ultimate source and destiny: the Holy, the divine ground of all things, "in which we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). This ground is known by a host of names and titles, but the foundational article of Christian faith is two-fold: that the ontological unity of Creator/creation disclosed in Christ is the ultimate reality that holds all things together (Colossians 1: 17); God's most fervent desire is that divine unity be manifest in every aspect of our existence, as individuals and as communities (Ephesians 3:14-19).

The contemplative tradition is grounded in the concept of kenosis as found in the ancient hymn recorded in Philippians. "Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."[34] Kenosis—self-emptying or out-pouring—describes the dynamism of the Triune God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In Jesus is disclosed the constant flow of Spirit-to-spirit between Father and

[33] The workshop was at my home on November 8, 2012.
[34] Philippians 2:6-7 (NRSV).

Son by which the Creator and creation are unified in love and purpose. Kenosis creates a dynamically emptying and filling union with God for which we truly and ultimately yearn.

Theologian Jay McDaniel used the phrase Open Space[35] as a way of describing who God is. The kenosis of the incarnation is an example of God opening space to embrace the creative order. In this respect, Open Space and Void have different connotations, but really refer to a similar concept. The reconciling kenotic embrace of God in the incarnation is God creating a void of divine potentiality, an open space which draws in the loving creativity of the life of the Trinity.

For us to dwell in our true ground, the Triune God, we must open up space by facing the void of negation and allowing all distractions to dissipate. This is the essence of the spiritual life: emptying ourselves of false identities, idols, inordinate attachments, and discordant passions, to make room for the Spirit of God who will testify to the truth about who we are, and to whom we belong.[36] Jesus taught us to embrace the void saying, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."[37]A kenotic response results in a self-emptying of false identities in order that our deepest and most authentic self may emerge. When we let go of our false attachments and strivings, and when we allow ourselves to be filled with the union already undergirding our existence, we experience the promise of eternal life, here and now as the kingdom/kindom of God.

Gerald May writes that most people don't realize that they are already united with God, which is the fundamental reality of their existence. Without this realization, we do not engage life authentically by living into and living out of this reality. He writes:

> The problem for most of us is that we don't realize how united we are with God. Except in rare moments of

[35] Jay McDaniel, *Living from the Center: Spirituality in an Age of Consumerism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 103.
[36] John 16:13 (NRSV).
[37] Matthew 16:25 (NRSV).

> mystical experience, most of us don't generally feel such intimacy with the Divine. Even if we believe devoutly that God is present with us, our usual experience is that we are "here" and God is "there," loving and gracious perhaps, but irrevocably separate. At worst, we give lip service to God's presence, but then feel and act as if we were completely on our own. I think of church committee meetings, pastoral counseling sessions, or even spiritual direction meetings I have attended. They often begin with a sincere prayer, "God, be with us (as if God might be in attendance at another meeting) and guide our decisions and our actions." Then at the end comes, "Amen," and the door crashes shut on God-attentiveness. Now we have said our prayers and it is time to get down to business.[38]

In other words, we might proclaim that God is already present, but our actions say otherwise. The hope of the contemplative tradition is that we move from a cognitive understanding of union, and a superficial dabbling in it, to an actualized living out of our union with and in God. The contemplative tradition provides a response to the invitation that pastoral dread offers: to submit our ego defenses and to yield to the transforming power of the only true ground of our existence—God.

The contemplative spiritual journey begins with an awakening and a longing to recover our true identity. We first awaken to our needs, not only our needs mentioned above, but fundamentally our need to be loved and to love. In our awakening we are invited "to know God and to be known by God, which presupposes that one finds and knows one's self. Awakening allows for the initial stages of distinguishing between the false and true self."[39]

Awakening turns into longing to find our true center; to return to our true home. Heuertz notes that the Welsh word for longing is *hiraeth*, "It means more than longing. It indicates an all-consuming

[38] Gerald May, *The Dark Knight of the Soul* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 44.
[39] May, *The Dark Knight of the Soul,* 64.

homesickness."[40] Longing, then, is the realization that our current reality of living from our false self is not sustainable, we know deep down there must be more to life. Heuertz continues, "Longing propels us forward. It's difficult to sit in the ache of longing, so sometimes we avoid it. But when we embrace that gut-level discontent, we are moving and growing."[41]

And so the false self must die so the true self might emerge. But what is that true self? Keating describes the true self as "the image of God in which every human being is created; our participation in the divine life manifested in our uniqueness."[42] Awakening and longing teach us that we are free to choose the reality of our true self and allow the false self to die, or we can continue an inauthentic existence.

Traditionally the contemplative tradition describes three stages of experiences on the journey toward the true self, our union with God. Those three stages are commonly called: purgation, illumination, and union. I visualize these concurrent processes of purgation, illumination, and union as three concentric circles. The outer circle being purgation, the middle circle illumination, and the inner circle union with the divine. Purgation is the process of letting go of false attachments that feed our false self. Illumination is the process of receiving the deepest truth about ourselves and about God. Union is the process of living and engaging the world out of our truest self. It is resting in the true ground of our existence—God.

Heath reminds us that the three stages happen at the same time. She says that the phases of the contemplative journey are simultaneous rather than sequential, but our human finitude prevents us from seeing their simultaneity, so that we perceive of them as being distinct phases. Even so…[they] may still be described in a cyclical sense, for the purgation of the night waxes and wanes, along with seasons of illumination and moments of union.[43]

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[40] May, *The Dark Knight of the Soul,* 64.
[41] May, *The Dark Knight of the Soul,* 65.
[42] Keating, *Invitation*, 148.
[43] Heath, *Mystic Way*, 30.

Purgation, also known as purification, is the process by which the wounds of the psyche and the ego strategies used to mask or avoid the pain are exposed. Moreover, in the purgation we begin to let go of those strategies and allow the inner pain to remain. This "mystic pain" is purifying in the sense that we seek not to withdraw too quickly in response to the pain by fixing our lived world or fixing our ego through avoidant behaviors and self-abnegation. The invitation of dread is to purge or let go (*kenosis*) of coping mechanisms that tend to feed the false and keep the true self hidden. In purgation we learn to let go of the programs of happiness.

As we experience purification and the remnants of the false self are stripped away, we are in a better position to receive the truth of who we are, united with God. In this stage there are stories of mystics receiving visions of the truth. Others describe this stage as receiving a deep peace where striving for significance ends and they rest in the acceptance of God. One of the most illuminating experiences for me is claiming the promises of trinitarian theology that in Jesus Christ my life is hidden in God.

Illumination offers its own inherent danger, however. We may begin to equate the *experiences* of God's grace with the *reality* of God. The danger is when the experiences of God wane, we mistakenly think God is not present, and so we must return to the process of purgation to let go of those false ideas and perceptions. "Thus, much of the contemplative life involves something of an alternation between purification and illumination."[44]

Union with God is the final stage and is difficult to put into words. It is more than an experience of union with God. In this stage our typical ways of interpreting reality are bypassed and established—to some degree, never fully—upon the unitive ontology of Creator and creation. We know God and are known by God is a totally unique way, and we live more deeply out of the more fundamental ontology of union. Heuertz described this unitive state, "When living in the unitive way, we are free to receive

[44] Bauerschmidt, *Mystic*, 18.

and give love. Our motivations are rooted in love rather than in ego-centered compulsions or 'programs of happiness.' The true self is alive and active."[45]

Practicing the Truth of the Divine Life

It has been said that contemplative practice leads to quietism and isolation, and it must be admitted that when contemplation is used—wrongly—to shield people from active engagement, then the criticisms are well-founded. However, Richard Foster, a spiritual writer and teacher, countered this criticism as he distinguished between Eastern religions and Christian meditation. He said, "Eastern meditation is an attempt to empty the mind; Christian meditation is an attempt to empty the mind in order to fill it."[46] The goal of Christian meditation is to empty the mind of false attachments and fill it with the mind of Christ. Foster pointed out that "contemplatives were men and women of action"[47] because the true spirituality of Christianity is incarnational. If it is an incarnational spirituality that releases us from a false self into our true self, then we are necessarily thrust into the world in a renewed engagement. An incarnational faith is always embodied, always enacting the divine life; if truly incarnational—and thus truly Christlike—faithful practice never leads to isolation or inertia. Heuertz connected action and contemplation this way: "True prayer connects us with the compassionate Christ who connects us to all humanity and inspires us toward compassionate service."[48]

On one level the contemplative response to pastoral dread is not as radical a response today as it might've been decades ago due to the popularity of mindfulness. Today mindfulness is discussed and practiced in schools, in the military, and in business settings to build resilience and face challenging contexts. It is understandable then that therapeutic modern mindfulness techniques might shape discussion about the classical contemplative traditions.

[45] Heuertz, *Pilgrimage*, 171.
[46] Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 20.
[47] Foster, *Celebration of Discipline,* 20.
[48] Heuertz, *Pilgrimage*, 137.

Consequently, some might view or engage contemplative spiritual practices as psychological soothing techniques shoring up ego strategies as the self engages the lived world two-dimensionally. However, the authentic lure of contemplative spiritual practices is to a lifetime of intentional dying to the temptation to relate to God on our terms, and posturing one's self to relate to God on God's terms.

James Finley, in *The Contemplative Heart*, said that even in a monastery, temptations abound for distraction in the "frenetic energy of rush hour traffic...with monks running around with a lot of keys...trying to get a lot of important things finished before Vespers."[49] Pastors often find themselves busy doing significant ecclesial things in service of others; however, many times this work is merely an unconscious attempt to assure a fragile ego that busyness is truly the work of God. However, Finley gently reminded us that "there is no ontology to rush hour, either in the cloister or out here 'in the world.' God never said, 'Let there be rush hour.'"[50] Contemplative spirituality is not a salve for weary worship leaders seeking to be effective, but an intentional embodied posture that exposes a more fundamental "dilemma of how difficult it is to live contemplatively."[51]

Choosing a contemplative response to pastoral dread can be daunting at first; choosing one form of prayer from the vast array of meditative styles can definitely seem complicated. However, contemporary contemplative practitioners like Thomas Keating and Phileena Heuertz offered a fairly straightforward way of entering the contemplative tradition through *centering prayer*.

Centering prayer is a practice that begins to teach practitioners to rest in the present moment and begin to move from an ego-centric experience to a deeper center which is one's union with the Triune God. I recommend that centering prayer, which is often a first step into the contemplative tradition, can be a benefit to pastors dealing with the intensification of pastoral dread. As I have

[49] James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2000), 33.
[50] Finley, *Contemplative Heart*, 33.
[51] Finley, *Contemplative Heart, 34.*

argued earlier, pastoral anxiety emerges when one's rumination is centered on the possibilities of loss in future choices. Centering prayer begins to transform one's orientation from the future to the present moment. Moreover, centering prayer begins to allow practitioners to let go of ruminating thoughts and dwell, more or less, outside mental cognitions.

Thomas Keating described contemplative prayer as "the pure gift of God. It is the opening of mind and heart—our whole being—to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words, and emotions."[52] He went on to say that centering prayer is a practice that develops the spiritual "faculties to receive this gift"[53]—the gift of contemplative prayer. Centering prayer is not the whole of contemplative prayer but a way of training ourselves to receive the gift of communion with the Triune God.

Keating's model offered four steps of centering prayer. First, one picks a sacred word or image that represents the "consent to God's presence and action."[54] Second, sit comfortably with the body erect and eyes closed. In silence "introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within."[55] Third, when thoughts come into consciousness, use the sacred word to gently return to the practice of stillness and mental quiet. Keating considered thoughts to include: "body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections."[56] This gentle return to the intention of openness to God is the "only activity…during the time of Centering Prayer."[57] Finally, after at least twenty minutes in centering prayer, sit in silence for a few more minutes and "being to think…ordinary thoughts again."[58]

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[52] Thomas Keating, *The Method of Centering Prayer: The Prayer of Consent* (Butler, NJ: Contemplative Outreach, Ltd., 2006), 1.
[53] Keating, *The Method of Centering Prayer,* 1.
[54] Keating, *The Method of Centering Prayer,* 2.
[55] Keating, *The Method of Centering Prayer,* 2.
[56] Keating, *The Method of Centering Prayer,* 2.
[57] Keating, *The Method of Centering Prayer,* 2.
[58] Keating, *Open Mind*, 37.

These are four simple steps of centering prayer as taught by Thomas Keating.[59] Others who teach centering prayer share the same basic framework of sitting with eyes closed for at least twenty minutes and using the sacred word when one becomes aware of thinking "thoughts" to return to the original intention of resting in the silence of the mind and open to God's presence.

Contemplation is a method of prayer where we no longer are the pray-ers. Rather, over time we become the object of prayer as the Spirit of God prays through us. When we practice contemplative prayer, we trust that God, our true center, is always with us and seeking to transform us. Therefore, we sit in silence and let go of each thought, a possible false attachment, as they spring up from our ego consciousness. As we develop this practice over time, we allow an openness to the work of the Spirit operating within our entire being without doing anything, without any effort on our part. The compulsion to perform withers. The need to be recognized lessens.

To dwell in our union with God is transformational, said Thomas Keating:

> Contemplative prayer is a process of interior transformation, a conversion initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union. One's way of seeing reality changes in this process. A restructuring of consciousness takes place which empowers one to perceive, relate, and respond to everyday life with increasing sensitivity to the divine presence in, through and beyond everything that happens. …Contemplation is a fundamental constituent of human nature and hence available to every human being. It is accessed by letting go of our own idea of ourselves, turning our will

[59] The model is simple. However, there are numerous questions that can be asked about methodology and the practicalities of the practice. It is not my intention to address all of these questions. Rather, I would recommend Keating's *Open Mind, Open Heart* as the "textbook" on centering prayer that addresses many questions and concerns regarding this contemplative practice.

> over to God, and resting in the Divine Indwelling that is already present within us and waiting to reveal itself to us.[60]

I offer two cautions for pastors who might be interested in contemplative practices but who are not currently practicing. The first caution is the desire for individual effect. Many folks equate contemplative spirituality with sense-based mystical experiences (e.g., visions and voices; clarity and calm; sensing the presence of God). However, expecting particular outcomes is a fruit of our false self trying to control the process and projecting our expectations upon the work of the Spirit. One might not feel anything in centering prayer; typically, contemplation is rather boring. The fruit shows up in our daily lives, not in the time of prayer.

The second caution has to do with external effects. A pastor's decision to engage contemplative spirituality does not guarantee one develops a magnetic, inspirational personality to lead congregations through exilic times. Contemplative practices should never be used as the next new gimmick to jolt the church growth movement back to life. It is not a spiritual tool but a way of living more deeply in the divine life. Contemplative pastors are prepared day in and day out by sitting in attentive silence to be spokespersons (dare I say prophets) of courage: proclaiming meaning amid decline, decay, and death; proclaiming redemptive engagement; proclaiming judgment on systems that dehumanize.

Cynthia Bourgeault, my teacher at the Center for Action and Contemplation's Living School, would tell us the best way to start a contemplative practice is to "do the deal." One starts by starting. One simple approach to begin a centering prayer practice is to start a daily ten-minute practice. For beginners I recommend setting a quiet alarm on a phone or watch to sound off at three minutes, six minutes, and at the end of ten minutes. This prevents a common thought stream of wondering how much time has passed and is to come. In addition, along with the sacred word or symbol, the quiet alarm can gently bring us back to the present moment. After

[60] Keating, *Open Mind*, 1-2.

a few weeks of this ten-minute practice, move to a twenty-minute practice with the alarm set at five minutes, ten minutes, and fifteen minutes. Finally, after several weeks of this schedule, one could move to an entire twenty-minute practice with no intermediate alarms.

"Doing the deal" is not complicated. There isn't much "going on." And yet, it is the way to death: death to personal expectations of success, death to congregational/denominational expectations of effectiveness, and death to expectations that the Divine will give particular experiences. The good news is where there is death, resurrection is sure to come.

Contemplative practice does not relieve us of dread, but the practice retrains the self to rest in the present moment. It is in the present moment that we experience our truest self in its union with God, and in that holy union, the truth sets us free.

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