

“Invitation” by Mary Oliver from *A Thousand Mornings*, published by Penguin Books, 2013

Oh do you have time
to linger
for just a little while
out of your busy

and very important day
for the goldfinches
that have gathered
in a field of thistles

for a musical battle,
to see who can sing
the highest note,
or the lowest,

or the most expressive of mirth,
or the most tender?
Their strong, blunt beaks
drink the air

as they strive
melodiously
not for your sake
and not for mine

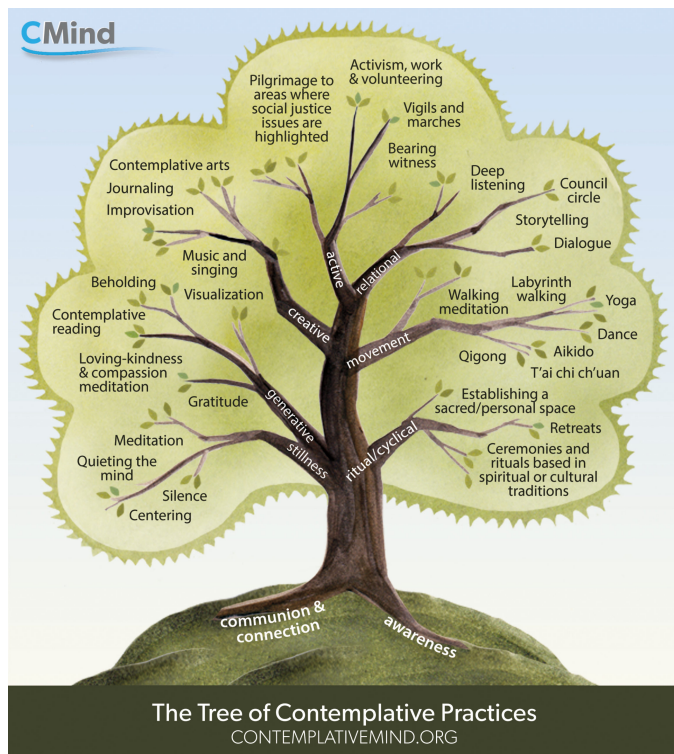
and not for the sake of winning
but for sheer delight and gratitude –
believe us, they say,
it is a serious thing

just to be alive
on this fresh morning
in the broken world.
I beg of you,

do not walk by
without pausing
to attend to this
rather ridiculous performance.

It could mean something.
It could mean everything.
It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:
You must change your life.

Pilgrimage: an invitation into the way of the soul



As you may know, contemplative practices - including long distance walking - are branches of a larger spiritual tree called the Contemplative Christian tradition. This "tree" stands within a pan-spiritual forest, among Buddhist, Primal/indigenous, Jewish, and Muslim trees. Hinting how a "wayless" way (the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart's term) can offer our fractured world unifying practices for all people regardless of one's faith path.

I discovered the "tree" to the left while searching for content for this primer. In addition to movement (walking along a recreational or pilgrimage path), "THE WAY of THE SOUL" practices several of the "tree's" branches from deep listening to rituals to contemplative arts. All of which are intended to invite interior exploration and engagement with "soul".

Years ago, when I was introduced to contemplative prayer practice, I approached it as a technic to be performed rather than as a gift to receive. Frankly, I treated these first experiences with skepticism. Nevertheless, I continued to try to quiet my brain so that God might show up. After a two year course with the Shalem Institute not only did I unlearn some spiritual habits of mind while gaining substantial respect for the contemplative tradition, I was transformed from the inside out. In the process of emptying my mind of thoughts, space opened up within my body. Silence became a threshold through which I began to experience healing, peace, rest without leaving my chair or uttering a word. I could be "con templum" (in the temple with) with the Divine.

Jesus, I contend, describes this inner radiance as a well-spring: a source of sacred well-beingness that can be accessed all the time. As a more holistic path to the sacred, contemplative practices assume that God's domain is within us - fully present in the here and the now - as it is beyond us. All I know is that my path through inner stillness into divine encounter was life-altering. Ultimately, my experience with silence lead me out of congregational leadership and into the spiritual discipline called pilgrimage. I will say more about the relationship between Presence and contemplative walking, between neuroscience and spirituality in a bit.

For the moment, I invite you to hold space for the possibility that the branches of the contemplative tree pictured above are imbedded in, assumed by, and in alignment with our sacred texts. Further, to hold space for how Jesus' way inclines toward the contemplative. He went off alone to pray. He told figurative, poetic stories. He was a walker. His pace was pedestrian. He welcomed anyone who was open to grace, regardless of background, to come along - walk - with him. Time and again, he was willing not only to claim God's present domain; but also, he demonstrated how God shows up, heals, restores in the ordinary acts of eating and story telling and touching broken lives.

CONTEMPLATIVE CHRISTIANITY...THE MYSTICAL IMPULSE

More often than not, the contemplative Christian tradition is associated with the Spanish mystics, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. No doubt, they are important personalities and contributors within contemplative circles, inspiring Spain's pilgrimage tradition. That shared, the Spaniards are not spiritual outliers. Jesus - especially in the Gospel According to John - sounds and acts like a mystic. Following in his footsteps, the desert fathers (and mothers) who dwelled in the Egyptian wilderness disclosed contemplative sensibilities. Later, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Francis and Clare of Assisi appeared. Meister Eckhart (we will hear from him on our walk) was a twelfth century mystic whose name seems to pop up more and more among his contemporaries like Richard Rohr, Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, Howard Thurman, Cynthia Bourgeault, John O Donahue. All of these folks share common spiritual tendencies: what I am calling the marks of a mystic.

“MARKS OF A MYSTIC”

Willingness rather than willfulness;

Humility;

Love is core to their identity and consciousness;

Recognize and welcome spiritual depth in another person regardless of his/her religious label/source;

Take practice seriously while not taking Presence for granted....

*While mysticism is universal, it also seems that mysticism benefits from a healthy spiritual, theological ecosystem. Most mystics have pointed the way to a unitive path within a religious framework (Rumi within Sufism; Tibetan Buddhism), maintaining ties to the disciplines and practices of their particular faith tradition. Rather than digging a lot of "spiritual" holes, none of which go very deep: most mystics persevere at digging **one well deep** to access the living water. Mystics are disciplined, faith-based practitioners.*

Rely on grace and wonder, appreciating how the Divine is not under our control;

Comfortable with paradox, ambiguity, and unknowing;

Take a unitive rather than dualistic approach to seeing, accessing, interpreting Presence.

CONTEMPLATIVE WALKING...PILGRIMAGE AS EMBODIED PRAYER

It is to this last “mark” of a mystic that I turn our attention. One of the habits of mind many of us who were/are raised in church/doctrinal systems is to frame faith dualistically. We tend to speak of Heaven and Earth; Good and Bad; Sacred and Secular. One of the dualisms that contemplative walking challenges is that of the mind/body dichotomy...as though Body and Mind or the Material and Immaterial are foreign domains. Thank you Rene Descartes (French philosopher, scientist, mathematician and devout Catholic) among others for our western-minded tendency to divide “this” from “that”. Not inherently a bad thing: our rational mindedness has led to tremendous discoveries, benefiting humanity. But where we may have gotten ourselves into trouble is allowing the mind/body, sacred/secular divide to grow so large that our theology often inhibits us from experiencing wholeness - LIFE, or PRESENCE, GOD or LOVE's domain - in our own bodies.

Well, here is something to ponder: neuroscience has blown this dualism to bits, supporting what mystics already “knew”. That knowledge being: soul and body are one. In this regard, Buddhists have one on most Western-minded folks. They have long assumed body and mind are different emanations of the same coin.

As it is, neuroscientists generally agree that our brains were shaped by one singular fact. We are bipedal creatures. At some point in our evolutionary history, we walked upright, on two

feet. Which is why our brains have a right lobe and left lobe incubating a smaller reptilian “brain”, a right foot and a left foot, a right and a left eye on the front of our heads. We walked before we made fire and tools and pondered the stars above and first gathered to worship somewhere in ancient Mesopotamia.

We are pedestrian creatures. And for the entirety of human history - until about 100 years ago - we maintained a pedestrian pace. Over the millennia, our brains were calibrated to a pace of about three to, at most, five miles per hour. Which means, modernity’s speed has far outpaced our brains’ capacity to process data. Our brains are not wired for speed. We are, however, wired for walking, which is why creative aha’s often come to folks when we go outside and take a walk. By slowing down, by landing in our bodies, clarity often comes. Walking - particularly walking in the outdoors - restores neural balance.

Walking also puts on the same spiritual ground of all the great spiritual/philosophical teachers and innovators. We, like them, can walk ourselves into well-being. Again, neuroscience supports this claim. Our brains are able to create new neural pathways (called neuralplasticity), which walking - especially over long distances - supports. There is a reason why person after person who goes on a pilgrimage often experience an interior change: their brains have been physically recalibrated by way of slowing down to a walker’s pace.

When long distance walking is supported by spiritual practices...when we walk mindfully...long distance walking becomes a form of embodied prayer. Prayer without words, mind you; but prayer none-the-less...what some call ceaseless prayer. When the body is imagined to be a vessel through which Presence is hosted continuously as opposed to engaged intellectually - through verbal supplications - the sacred/secular divide falls apart. Again: neuroscience supports this. Our brains can perform only so many mental acts. Which means, a spiritual life based on words is inherently compartmentalized. Our brains can only attend to a few bit of input at a time, switching back and forth from one idea to another. The busier we are, the less neurological time we give to God. BUT! When the body is brought into the divine/human dialogue, PRESENCE is given more space to inhabit and to inspire and to transform.

I could on and on. I will stop here, welcoming questions about pilgrimage as they arise in you. There is so much more to say and to share.

What I hope is that our experience in The Camino de la Alma (The Way of the Soul) provides us the space to slow down, to recalibrate, to recreate, to experience awe, to slough off “stuff” that we all may reawaken to the abundant PRESENCE, RADIANCE, GRACE that is around and within us. Accept Mary Oliver’s invitation to listen, to pause, to linger in the ridiculous performance God offers us every single day - every single step we take - because doing so could mean everything.

Ever on the way, Charis

