Contemplation, action, and uncertainty

Three grounds for life

Amelia Pahl

> *Contemplation is the highest expression of [one's] intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. . . . [Contemplation]* knows *the Source [of life], obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith. . . . Contemplation is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or even in clear concepts. . . . For in contemplation we know by "unknowing." Or, better, we know* beyond *all knowing or "unknowing."*
>
> –*Thomas Merton*[1]

I am here to suggest to you that uncertainty, obscurity, "unknowing," and the like are the necessary, fertile ground for a truly rich contemplative practice. If you already agree with me on that point, then I am also here to suggest that contemplation (also called contemplative prayer) is itself the necessary, fertile ground for meaningful and life-giving action in the face of uncertainty. These three "grounds" for life—contemplation, action, and uncertainty—do not follow each other in any consistently linear order; the deeper you dig into one, the more likely you are to encounter the other two. However, in a world where both mature contemplation and life-giving action are often difficult to find, I suspect that our surest way of success will be to begin by digging deeply into the rich soil of uncertainty. In doing so, we will define the Christian practice of contemplation, which will in turn have something to teach us about the nature of truly prayerful action. Contemplation and action, rightly lived, are not inherently op-

1 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 1–2, emphasis original.

posed, and uncertainty itself may be the key to cultivating mature attentiveness and responsiveness to the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst.[2]

Contemplation and uncertainty

Contemplation has everything to do with uncertainty, at least potentially. Mild uncertainty is characterized by a lack of clarity in the situation at hand, an inability to discern the best way forward or predict the outcome of a certain action. At a far greater scale, the uncertainty with which we look today upon a world ravaged by greed, oppression, and climate change may be characterized by the near total extinction of any sense of the future. In other words, when we talk about "the uncertainty of our times," we are talking not only about a lack of clarity as to how best to move forward but also about the realization that a great number of near-futures are possible, including ones in which humans no longer exist. Twenty-first century "uncertainty," then, is not only the postmodern whiplash after modern arrogance but also symptomatic of our dawning understanding that we have pushed the earth beyond its ability to renew itself. We are "uncertain" because we have virtually no precedent, no way to know what the future will look like.

The uncertainty with which we look today upon a world ravaged by greed, oppression, and climate change may be characterized by the near total extinction of any sense of the future.

Everything turns on our response to this uncertainty, this loss of direction and future. We can take to the streets, demanding radical change by flinging ourselves against the oily body of corporate greed, or we can try to shut out the fear by living only for our personal pleasure and consumption. I would argue that both responses are partially right, but they need ultimately to be chastened by the discipline of contemplation.

2 Many of the reflections and ideas in this essay are my own in the sense that, unless explicitly specified, I am not drawing from any single source but am speaking from the totality of my experience. However, these reflections and ideas are decidedly *not* my own in the sense that countless wise people have enriched my understanding and practice of contemplation over the years, including Thomas Merton, Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver, Sarah Coakley, Martin Laird, Thich Nhat Hanh, Pema Chödrön, Rumi, Rainer Maria Rilke, Richard Foster, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, Matthew Fox, Joanna Macy, Brother Roger of Taizé, Pádraig Ó Tuama, John O'Donohue, Henri Nouwen, and many more. Without their guidance, I would have nothing worthwhile to say here.

Rather than reacting against the loss of future in self-righteous anger or self-gratifying defeat, we find in the discipline of contemplation a turn *toward* the uncertainty, embracing it as a good friend. This is because in contemplation we find that uncertainty is often the incubator of insight, preparing us to encounter the One who cannot be known. Thomas Merton puts it this way:

> *If nothing that can be seen can either be God or represent Him to us as He is, then to find God we must pass beyond everything that can be seen and enter into darkness. Since nothing that can be heard is God, to find Him we must enter into silence. Since God cannot be imagined, anything our imagination tells us about Him is ultimately misleading and therefore we cannot know Him as He really is unless we pass beyond everything that can be imagined and enter into an obscurity without images and without the likeness of any created thing.*[3]

If God is beyond all sight, sound, and imagination, then the contemplative desire to experience God must first be purged of its false visions, hopes, and plans, for they will only serve to distract the seeker from the real presence of the living God. From this perspective, the uncertainty of our twenty-first-century world is a gift in that it offers us a ready opportunity to be purged of our false certainties, preparing us to see with new eyes the glory of God. We might say that the desert of the third-century fathers and mothers has become the climate change of the twenty-first-century contemplative!

I would suggest that contemplation *must* characterize our (Christian) response to contemporary uncertainty because it is only through the discipline, quiet, and attentiveness of contemplation that meaningful, life-giving action will find its strength.[4] Contemplation, as we have hinted, is fundamentally about prayer—that is, the communion of human and divine. In a basic sense, it is about coming to understand that, in the words of Martin Laird, "our deepest identity, in which thoughts and feelings

---

3 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 131.

4 I emphasize that contemplation is what must characterize the *Christian* response to uncertainty because other traditions will use other words and concepts, each suited to the particular spiritual logic of its context. The spiritual practice of contemplation dives deeply into the Christian spirit specifically, but other ways of expressing deep presence and action can and do exist (such as the Buddhist practice of mindfulness as taught by Thich Nhat Hanh).

appear like patterns of weather on Mount Zion (Ps 125), remains forever immersed in the silence of God."[5] It can be easy to think of contemplation as a sort of mind-break, helpful for resting the stressed-out brain and catching our breath, so that we can step, reinvigorated, back into the fray of life. But the contemplation that Laird and Merton describe is not so much a spiritual pit-stop as it is a method for learning to attune ourselves to the Life beneath and beyond the fray. This suggests that contemplation is not, at its core, the half-hour or so spent sitting in silence but rather an all-pervading attunement to something much deeper than the surface of our daily lives.

Characteristics of contemplative practice

Once we have accepted that the uncertainty of our situation forces us to release our many hopes and expectations for what the world *should* be like, contemplation encourages us to start being attentive to what *is*. Put another way, as we release our expectations and images of what God is like, we create more room within ourselves to encounter the living God who is beyond all our images and expectations. In contemplation, we enter into the obscurity of God by practicing attentiveness, what Laird calls "stillness" and "watchfulness."[6] We watch without expectation or judgment. We observe the comings and goings of life around us as well as the flow of thoughts and feelings within us. We watch and wait on God like the ten virgins in the parable, knowing not when God will come or what it will be like but only *that* God will come as surely as the dawn (Matt. 25:1–13).

In contemplation, we seek to find the balance between vigilant readiness to receive God and the constant need to release our expectations of what the encounter with God will be like.

From this, we may begin to see how contemplation has the potential to profoundly impact our ways of thinking and asking questions. In a certain sense, contemplation is the art of attention without fixation, a deep attunement that nevertheless respects mystery. In contemplation, we seek to find the balance between vigilant readiness to receive God and

5 Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14.

6 Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 4.

the constant need to release our expectations of what the encounter with God will be like. This tension is powerfully invoked by British theologian Sarah Coakley, who advocates for a theological method that is rooted in contemplative prayer. For Coakley, "theology is always, if implicitly, a *recommendation for life*," one that "invites ongoing—and sometimes disorienting—response and change, both personal and political, in relation to God."[7] Coakley calls this "theology *in via*" because "the task of theology is always in motion (*in via*), always undoing and redoing itself, not only in response to shifting current events, but because of the deepening of vision that may—and should—emerge from such [contemplative] ascetical demand and execution."[8] In other words, our theological reflection would do well to root itself in the wisdom of contemplation, which understands that we must get out of our own way and allow the Spirit to "chasten" our desires for mastery and certainty by (re)directing them toward the living God.[9]

The wisdom of contemplation understands that we must get out of our own way and allow the Spirit to "chasten" our desires for mastery and certainty by (re)directing them toward the living God.

But contemplation is not only a reorientation of the intellect; it is also a reorientation of the body. In describing "the actual *practice* of contemplation that is the condition of a new 'knowing in unknowing,'" Coakley writes that "it must involve the stuff of learned bodily enactment, sweated out painfully over months and years, in duress, in discomfort, in bewilderment, as well as in joy and dawning recognition."[10] Contemplation takes place in time and space, within our very embodiment. It asks us to discipline both thought and action by bringing them through the crucible of silence and stillness. In this way, contemplation also invites us to see that thought and action can never totally stop (nor should we want them to), but we *can* learn to be attentive and faithful to *this* breath, *this* movement, *this* stirring of the heart. Thus, a contemplative practice that enables good and life-giving action amid uncertainty will begin with the attentiveness

---

7 Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18, italics original.

8 Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 18–19.

9 Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 13–15 and 51–52.

10 Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 45–46, emphasis original.

and stillness necessary to withhold judgment, release certainty, and observe the minute building blocks of action.

Contemplative action

It should be increasingly evident by now that true contemplation challenges the dichotomy that we often make between "action" and "inaction." Consider, for example, Wendell Berry's poem "Grace," which draws us into the vibrant heart of contemplation. There Berry closely and carefully contemplates the woods in the morning light, observing "how flawless its grace is."[11] With Berry, we might learn something about action once we slow down enough to observe (contemplate) the actions of the land that holds us. The trees are never still. They are always in motion, growing, deepening, ripening, and returning to the earth. A surface-level glance with human eyes would suggest that the trees do nothing in particular. But in the stillness and silence of contemplation, we begin to touch the deeper, unceasing movement of Life, where action may at times be as slow and quiet as a snow-covered forest. We may come to contemplation with raging hearts and unsettled minds, angry and afraid of the state of our world and future, wondering how making space for stillness and silence could ever accomplish what we believe so obviously needs to be accomplished *right now*. But the deeper we dig into the rich soil of contemplation, the more clearly we will hear God's gentle voice: *Give those fears, the anger, the uncertainty to me; enter deeply into the simplest of actions, your breath, and know that I am the One who moves your bones*. Action, we come to realize, is not something we can force entirely of our own individual will, for action at its deepest is the continuous and infinite breath of God in us and through us.

Action, we come to realize, is not something we can force entirely of our own individual will, for action at its deepest is the continuous and infinite breath of God in us and through us.

From a contemplative Christian perspective, action can be seen as participation in the Trinity. Coakley writes that "the dialogue of prayer is strictly speaking not a simple communication between an individual and a divine monad, but rather a movement of divine reflexivity, a sort

11 Wendell Berry, "Grace," in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (New York: Counterpoint, 1998), 30. Although I cannot reproduce the entire text here, this poem bears reading in its entirety and can be found several places online by searching for it by name.

of answering of God to God in and through the one who prays."[12] Prayer is "a delicate ceding to something precisely not done by oneself," for in prayer—or contemplation—we learn to participate in an interchange that is somehow beyond simple human will.[13] This contemplative interchange draws us out of our small selves and into what Merton calls "the interior life of God," a "circle of relations [in Three Persons] in which [God's] infinite reality, Love, is ever identical and ever renewed." For Merton, this circle "is perfect contemplation."[14] What this suggests for us who seek to understand contemplative action is that God, in three Persons, is perfect, unceasing action, giving and receiving in total reciprocity. In contemplation, God invites us into this perfect action, invites us to commune with what is indeed the very heart of action: a Trinitarian dance that has been in motion since long before humans ever walked the earth. Here we begin to learn what it might mean to say with Paul, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).[15]

In contemplation, God invites us to commune with what is indeed the very heart of action: a Trinitarian dance that has been in motion since long before humans ever walked the earth.

Conclusion

We have barely dug an inch into the soil of contemplation, action, and uncertainty, but I hope that this inch leaves you curious to dig still deeper and discover more for yourself. As we have seen, uncertainty has the potential to carry us more swiftly into contemplation than if we began the contemplative journey convinced of our own security and rightness. In a certain sense, uncertainty reveals to us a key aspect of the human condition—that is, we are limited creatures whose life and sustenance depend always on God. Contemplation, too, reminds us of this truth when we

12 Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 113. Here she is discussing Romans 8:26–27.

13 Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 113.

14 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 68–69.

15 It would be fascinating to consider a contemplative reading of Galatians 2, but that would require another essay. Suffice it to say here that an essential aspect of Christian contemplation is the extremely painful experience of being "crucified with Christ," dying to old ways of being, dying to the ego-games that make us cling to possessions and identity, in order that Christ may live and pray in us.

begin to understand that "the love of God seeks us in every situation, and seeks our good,"[16] and that we are lost without this love. Contemplation gently opens us to the realization that we are neither the source of life nor the measure of true action and accomplishment, but that God nevertheless desires us and invites us to join in on the Trinity's sacred dance.

About the author

Amelia Pahl is working on a Master of Divinity at McGill University, after recently graduating from Canadian Mennonite University with a major in religion and narrative studies. Some of the things she loves dearly are trees, warm cups of tea, and singing. She lives with her wife in Montreal, Quebec.

---

16 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 15.