

## **REFLECTING ON THE PAST LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

On many occasions you will have heard people stand here and say, “Sr. Paul told me to...” or at our weekly Wednesday Centering Prayer Session someone will start with, “I was volunteered.” The tables have been turned – I was volunteered!

After our Conference last year, Peter Jamadar said to me, “We need a woman’s voice again, why don’t you do the talk next year!” I reacted with a definitive “No” as I am inclined to do; and then, as is customary, I thought, hesitated, and thought again. Perhaps the time had come for me to express my views. Not that I was given much chance to think otherwise!

Those of you who know Peter Jamadar, know of his powers of persuasion and of his insistence, so you won’t be surprised to hear that I received many a nudge – I needed to voice my vision, he insisted; I needed to point to the two strands in the Foundation - the psychological and spiritual; I needed to express why I had chosen to go this way. I needed to say...

And so I am saying. I am not sure that I have succeeded in pulling it all together with any measure of clarity but at least I am taking the first step. I want to begin by stating that I am not attempting an academic paper. I am instead telling my story, putting to you my reflections and inviting you to reflect with me, to ponder in your hearts.

### **QUESTIONS THAT PERSIST**

There are certain questions that have stayed with me throughout these past three or four decades – each one arising from an earlier one, each one leading me on. One of my early questions as a secondary school principal was: what is it to be a person?

This led to the next question – What is the responsibility of a school in facilitating personal development? And how is this personal development to be fostered? I saw the woundedness of the people around me; I was acutely aware of my own woundedness. How can a school be a healing community? I asked myself.

But, healing is not enough; beyond healing - what facilitates healthy, creative living? I pondered on these questions and I attempted to translate into action the fruit of my pondering – not with any great positive effect, I must confess. However the reflections continued, and led me to both psychology and contemplation. The words of Jesus recorded in John 10:10 kept ringing in my ears: “I have come that you may have life; life in abundance.”

The continuing persistence of these questions through the years, inevitably led to the question of transformation. How can this broken humanity of ours be transformed? And transformed into what? The answer could be nothing else than – transformed into the living God! So let me try to pull the pieces together.

## **THE BIRTH OF THE FOUNDATION FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

I retired from the teaching service at the end of December 1990. By this time it was abundantly clear to me that the future lies not in the “bookbags of children”, as we are so often told, but in the minds and hearts of the adults who care for children. I determined to devote the remainder of my life to the care of adults.

It was this resolution that gave birth to the Foundation for Human Development, a non profit charitable organisation established by a group of teachers, parents, past pupils, to provide a forum through which I could minister to adults. Initially I saw this ministry mainly in psychological terms. In more recent years the balance is shifting to contemplative prayer and contemplative living.

In 1991 and again in 1992, I went abroad to retrain in counselling. The road ahead was neither straight nor easy. In these same years 1991 and 1992 a niece and nephew of mine died suddenly and tragically. In 1994 my elder sister died within weeks of being diagnosed with cancer. During these very weeks I was caught up with the issue of the use of the hijab in schools and was catapulted into the public arena, an arena which up to then I had avoided. In 1995 my body reacted to the stress I was experiencing and I had surgery for an intestinal blockage. In 1996 my emotions joined in protest and I was overwhelmed by feelings of depression. Make no mistake about it – body, feelings and mind are all closely interconnected and impact upon one another. In 1997 the priest, who had for many years been my friend and mentor, died within a week of being diagnosed with cancer, mere days after surgery.

During these years I was on several Government educational and Church committees with their endless hours at endless meetings. It was within this context of personal stripping on the one hand and public over-involvement on the

other that I was attempting to root the fledgling Foundation for Human Development. I learnt that it is possible to live in several different worlds and at different levels at the same time even while doing what you have to do.

## **CENTERING PRAYER**

In August 1998, seeking solace, a change, something to lift my battered spirit, I attended a Workshop and Retreat organised by the World Community of Christian Meditation. Fr Laurence Freeman led the retreat; Fr Thomas Keating the workshop. I had never heard of Fr. Keating before this but as I listened to him what he said resonated with me and I knew that I had found the contemplative teaching and practice that I had been looking for. I read several of his books and in August 1999, I took part in a 10 day post intensive retreat at his Retreat Center near the Cistercian Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. I have not looked back since. By January 2000 I was teaching Centering Prayer. Those who see the course of life as a series of accidents are free to do so. I see a purposeful Hand guiding and directing.

It was not that Centering Prayer was my first experience of meditation. I had for over twenty years practised a Buddhist method of the breath which is virtually the same method as that of Centering Prayer. So, what is the difference?

I think that there are four essential differences:

- (1) First, Fr. Keating's Contemplative Outreach provided me with a sound theoretical context for the practice of Centering Prayer and meditation needs a solid theoretical context. Moreover it was a context that was within my own religious tradition and I had been searching for several years for a Christian Contemplative teaching and method that would speak to me. Centering Prayer did.
- (2) The second difference has to do with intention. I had originally come to meditation as a way of balancing a nervous temperament unable to cope with the stress of life and the stress of my particular stage of development. I had continued with it for much the same reason. It served me well. With Centering Prayer the intention shifted and the focus was more directly about ever deepening relationship with God.
- (3) Third, the very method of Centering Prayer is a continual reminder to be attentive to God's Presence and Action. We let go to the Divine Presence and Action within us. We rest in that Presence in the depth of our being and as a necessary corollary become increasingly aware of God's

Presence and Action in our lives and in the world around us. The world pulsates with the living God.

- (4) The fourth factor is that of participation in a community of people – all seeking God; all with the same intention of deepening relationship with God; all committed to the same spiritual practice. We need companions on the journey! I thank God for you.

As I reflect on these past eight years and on the growing numbers of those who practise Centering Prayer, I find it intriguing that the quest for God has brought together groups of very different people in Silent Prayer; people who remain faithful over time to a practice that in itself brings little or no pleasure or satisfaction – only willing surrender to the Divine Will and recognition of the transformation this surrender brings. I doubt that a psychological practice could have had the same power to attract and sustain. I am also acutely aware that the leadership team emerging in the Foundation is springing mainly, though not exclusively, from these groups. I feel blessed to be part of this process.

## **THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY**

But perhaps my story needs an even earlier start. As a young woman facing the choices of early adulthood, I struggled with the direction my life would take. I was offered a scholarship to a College in the US, a tempting option, particularly at that time when foreign travel and study abroad were not the norm. The prospect of marriage and a family was also appealing. God had other plans. There was a relentless call to the Religious Life. This had no emotional appeal for me but nonetheless remained relentless.

My mother was opposed to my joining the convent. My father was more indulgent. My mother thought that I was too young to make such a choice, that I had just finished school and needed to experience life. She shipped me off to my married sister who lived in the USA. When I returned to Trinidad, I went out to work and did the things young people do. I dated, partied, went to carnival fetes and beach limes, played tennis, went hiking and camping. I had a full and active life and I enjoyed it. And yet there was a persistent undercurrent that pulled at me.

I experienced conflict with one part of my personality wanting one thing; another part something else. At the surface level I was drawn in one direction; in my depth I was called elsewhere. The task of personality integration and of more

harmonious relationship between the surface self and the deep self lay in the future. At that time there was only the pain of fragmentation.

I finally gave way to the Call and entered Religious Life. I did not like the life. I had had no desire to enter the convent and I had no desire to stay there. Within a week I wanted to leave; as indeed I did many times after this, but this was at the level of surface desire. At another level, I chose to stay. I have no doubt that I exercised strong will willfully as I made myself do what I believed I had to do. At that stage I had no understanding or experience of the surrender of willingness.

Imperfect as my understanding was of God's Will, it became central to my life. But, as you probably know, it is not easy to know God's Will. Is it simply in blind obedience and conformity or is there a deeper personal responsibility? Is external behaviour enough or is an inner attitude equally necessary? And even when I thought I knew what God willed, I did not find it easy to give way to that Will.

Force creates its own difficulties. The issues that I shoved aside did not go away; they went underground and made sniper shots at me through the following years, erupting fully in my mid years. These were the great testing times during which I learnt at greater depth about choice and responsibility and about the consequences of choices. In the midst of the darkness and confusion of these mid years, God in His goodness sent a guide to lead me through the wilderness.

At some level I knew that I could remain faithful to the path to which I had been called only if I kept my eyes steadily on God. At times I forgot this, I drifted from the path; I slipped; I fell; I got up again. The years passed and the struggle continued. God's ways are mysterious. As I look back on my life I feel only gratitude for the path along which I have been led and which continues to open up before me.

## **ST PAUL**

It is no accident that as a young Sister I took the apostle Paul as my patron and asked for the name of Paul. I had read the life story of St. Paul and it inspired me. I was intrigued by his movement from persecutor of the early Christians to champion of Jesus Christ. He gave me hope. He was so human, so contradictory, so aware of his limitations and yet yearning for a larger vision and a greater life – a vision and life that he realised he could find only in the living God.

He had been caught up to the third heaven and “heard things which must not and cannot be put into human language”<sup>1</sup> yet he never became perfect. There was “a thorn in the flesh”<sup>2</sup> that reminded him that alone he could do nothing: with Christ all things!

He could say with quiet assurance, “I live, now not I, it is Christ who lives in me.”<sup>3</sup> And could proclaim with equal certainty, “I do not the things that I would that I do, but the things that I would not that I do, these are the things I do.”<sup>4</sup> I could resonate with this last. I knew only too well what it was like to do “the things that I would not that I do.”

Paul points to the transformation from “I do not the things that I would that I do” to “I live, now not I, it is Christ who lives in me”. He gives us a number of guidelines as to how to get from one to the other. He tells us to “put on” Christ, to have the Mind of Christ, and exhorts us “...never grow tired of doing what is right.”<sup>5</sup> He recognises the importance of thoughts and how they impact on behaviour and urges us to, “Fill your mind with all that is true, all that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise.”<sup>6</sup>

And he leaves us the example of his life, a life lived out of faith in the risen Christ and in fidelity to a call to mission. “Life to me is Christ”<sup>7</sup>, he says. What he invites us to is no easy joy ride, rather he calls us to a life of rigour and self sacrifice in the footsteps of a crucified Christ. But with this he is not advocating the victim stance and long faces of misery. Instead he cries out, “I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord; I repeat what I want is your happiness.”<sup>8</sup>

One of the great contemplatives of all time, he was also a man of action who engaged the issues of his day fearlessly. He spread the news of Jesus the Christ across the world of the Mediterranean. He was convinced that Christ had come for everyone – people of all nations and classes. “There are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:4

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:7

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 2:20

<sup>4</sup> Romans 7:16-17

<sup>5</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:14

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 4:8-9

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 1:21

<sup>8</sup> Philippians 4:4

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 3:26-29

He was persecuted, stoned, left for dead. Nothing deterred him as he continued on his way which finally led to a jail in Rome and beheading there. He lived in the consciousness of God's Presence and Action in his life and could exclaim, "In him we live and move and have our being."<sup>10</sup>

What about us, how do we get from "I do not the things that I would that I do" to "I live, now not I, Christ lives in me"? We have Paul's guidelines, but how do we translate them into action? What happened to Paul on the way to Damascus was a defining moment for him. It transformed him. We are far from transformed. Generally we have to make a tedious, disciplined journey to get from here to there. We seem to have so little control over our mind, so how are we going to fill our mind with all that is true, noble, good and pure? And how do we get past the unconscious drives that attempt to subvert our intention and take over our lives?

## **CENTERING PRAYER AS A WAY OF TRANSFORMATION**

The contemplative path as a way of transformation points beyond the self to No Self, to the "I live, now not I, it is Christ who lives in me." And Centering Prayer as taught by Thomas Keating reminds us that too often "we do not the things that we would that we do." We are driven by emotional programmes for happiness that create a false self in us. Instead of happiness these emotional programmes bring us unhappiness.

These programmes are hidden in the unconscious so that we are not even aware of them and yet they drive our thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Centering Prayer virtually forces us to face these emotional programmes and requires us "to let go" of them. "Letting go" is no easy process. It is slow and tedious. It requires patience and commitment. As we "let go" of the emotional programmes and of the false self, we live increasingly out of the true self, and we rest in the Divine Indwelling.

Our customary preoccupation with the incessant thoughts that fill our mind is like a ceiling that blocks the unconscious from coming into consciousness. When in Centering Prayer our mind quiets down that ceiling becomes permeable and the unconscious filters through. Sometimes gently, sometimes dramatically we come face to face with the demons within - unmet needs from our childhood, deprivation and abuse of one kind or another that drove us to develop compensatory behaviour to deal with the pain. Through the practice of Centering

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<sup>10</sup> Acts 17:28

Prayer, slowly, over time, we begin to get free of the control of the emotions and of the behaviour that they drive.

Keating speaks of Centering Prayer as Divine Therapy and claims that Centering Prayer goes deeper into the psyche than psychological therapy does! This may be true and yet even he admits that there are those who may need to see a therapist to address their psychological disorders, disorders that can block the spiritual path. I know the difference that psychological counselling has made in my life and I see the difference it makes in the lives of many.

Psychological understanding, a new world view, behavioural change can create space within us, clear the hurdles in our path and help us to continue the journey from the surface self to the deep self. But make no mistake, important and helpful as it may be, psychology is not enough. To quote Gerald May, "psychology stops short at the mystery of life. We need another discipline if we are to enter the vast unknown."<sup>11</sup>

That entry into the Unknown calls for faith and requires the practice of spiritual disciplines. The daily discipline of Centering Prayer morning and evening challenges us. Twenty minutes each time with the mind, like a monkey, racing hither, thither and hither again! It is no easy matter to remain faithful to this practice when the romance is over; when the early encouragements, the comforting feelings and insights are gone; gone the glimpses of undreamt of possibilities.

And yet we stay with it - twenty minutes of disciplined practice, morning and evening, as tiny bit by tiny bit, the worst is chiselled from us. Not that we can even see it happening. And yet, over time, almost unknowingly a knowing develops. Deep down somewhere inside of us we begin to know - in the midst of our unknowing. And a deep peace, gentle joy and abiding sense of gratitude emerge within us. Transformation is underway.

## **THOUGHTS MATTER**

As we sit in silent prayer, we allow our thoughts to come and go. We retain no thought, reject no thought, react emotionally to no thought. We learn slowly over time to free ourselves from the control of our thoughts. And outside of the time of prayer, we learn how to choose the thoughts that fill our mind so that we can respond to St. Paul's admonition to fill our minds with the true, the noble, the

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<sup>11</sup> Gerald G. May, *Will and Spirit*, p.10, Harper & Row, 1982

good. Thoughts Matter as Mary Margaret Funk reminds us in her book of that name.<sup>12</sup>

The Desert Fathers and Mothers of the third and fourth centuries soon enough came to this realisation. They had fled into the desert seeking God, had divested themselves of all of their possessions and of the comforts of life, but in the starkness of the desert and in the midst of silence, they realised that they had brought everything with them in their thoughts. They recognised that if they were to make the spiritual journey they had to free themselves from the control of their thoughts.

The psychologist, like the spiritual guide, will remind you of the interplay between thoughts and emotions and how these lead to behaviour. Evil thoughts lead to evil behaviour, good thoughts to good behaviour. Be aware of what is in your mind. "Fill your mind with all that is true, all that is noble..."

## **CONTEMPLATIVE SERVICE**

When we open our eyes after the stillness and silence of a Centering Prayer session, we re-enter the external world and we resume the tasks of everyday life. How do we keep alive the spirit of contemplation as we engage these everyday tasks?

We bring the very practice of presence with us. During the time of prayer, we "let go to" the Divine Presence and Action. In deep stillness and silence, we are completely present to the moment. After the prayer we continue to be present; now we are present to what we are doing. If we are cooking, we cook; if eating, we eat; if listening, we listen; if engaged in a complex mathematical or legal matter, this is what we do. However sophisticated, however simple the task, we are attentive to it. It is the quality of our presence that transforms our actions. We bring the Presence of God to whom we are with and to what we do. We engage in contemplative action.

And with the What of Attention and the How of Presence, there is also the Why. Why do we do what we do? Intention is everything, as Keating tells us. But our intentions can be very mixed. At a conscious level we can choose a given intention only to be driven by other unconscious motives. Where we are coming from is critical to intention. Are we driven by our instinctual needs so that, while our action might appear to be a response to God's Will or service in His name, we are instead attempting to meet our own need for survival and security, our

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Margaret Funk, Thoughts Matter, Ch1, Continuum, 1998

desire for pleasure and esteem, our drive for power and control? Or any combination of these and other biological or psychological needs?

To what extent can we “let go” of the consuming force of all of this and rest at a deeper level within ourselves, rest in the Divine Presence, and act from there? Action that springs from the love of God is qualitatively different from action that has its source anywhere else.

In this, as in all else, attentiveness is crucial. Unless we are aware, we will be driven by our unconscious motivations. We need “to catch” ourselves in the moment so that we purify our intention and allow it to come increasingly from the love of God within us. Keating reminds us that, “When attention to the present moment and a pure intention are established as habits, then we have, in the fullest sense of the word, contemplative service.”<sup>13</sup>

## **BLOCKS ALONG THE WAY**

Despite the claims of Centering Prayer and of therapy, I have seen people who have practised Centering Prayer over time and yet remain stuck. I have seen the same people engage in the process of therapy and they remain stuck. What blocks their path?

There are several responses to this question. I suggest but a few:

(i) Fear is perhaps one of our biggest barriers to change. Fear of the unknown can block not only outer but also inner change. It can paralyse us. If I change, will I lose my self image, my sense of who I am? And, if I do, how will you perceive me? And how will I cope with your new perception of me? We are terrified to leave where we are and go forward into the unknown. And the feelings can hijack the mind and come up with seemingly convincing arguments as to why we need to stay just where we are!

If I launch out into the deep, if I venture into uncharted waters – will I be lost forever? And so I cling to the shore. If I “let go” to the Void will I collapse into Nothingness rather than be united with the All? And so I cling to where I am and what I know. I cling to the familiar thoughts; or to the ideas that my mind can master. I turn away from mystery. The spiritual journey requires deep trust. It requires the spirit of abandon; it requires the daring of the explorer; the patience of a mother with her child!

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Keating, *The Practice of Attention/Intention*, p.97-101, *The Divine Indwelling*, Lantern Books, 2001

(ii) Another major barrier is, I think, the absence of willingness. We can mistake willfulness for willingness. Gerald May in the first chapter of his powerful book *Will and Spirit* makes the distinction between these two.<sup>14</sup> Many of us think we can bring about change willfully, through sheer force of will. I made this mistake and spent many years attempting to make myself do this, that or the other. I played havoc with my health.

Willingness notices the wonder of life and reverences it. Wilfulness ignores it or at its worst tries to destroy it. As May puts it, "...willingness implies a surrendering of one's self-separateness ...an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself. It is a realization that one already is a part of some ultimate cosmic process and it is a commitment to participation in that process. In contrast, wilfulness is the setting of oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to master, direct, control or otherwise manipulate existence."<sup>15</sup> But in the end, mastery must give way to mystery.

(iii) A third barrier is the denial of woundedness and of the need for healing. Instead of addressing their emotional distress, many bury the pain deep in their body and pretend it doesn't exist. They tighten their muscles around the pain so that they create, as it were, a sheet of armour so that nothing can get through to the pain. Eckhart Tolle in his popular book *A New Earth* eloquently describes the pain body and its impact on our lives.<sup>16</sup>

Some meditate as a way of avoiding their need to address this emotional pain. Instead of going into and through the pain, they attempt to skirt the pain and lose themselves in meditation looking for the "highs" that certain techniques bring. They wish to escape the drabness of life; they fear to explore their life story and what it might reveal. They seek refuge in a "pseudo-spirituality" to quote Ken Wilber.

When we bury our emotional pain in our body, our body pays the price – high blood pressure, digestive difficulties, ulcers, head ache, back ache, heart trouble...the list is endless. We release the emotional pain and often enough, the body is cured. At least this has been my experience.

(iv) And, there are other blocks. Among them: The tendency of some to cling to the delights of the early stages of prayer and their refusal to move on into the darkness of the nights of transformation. Others assume a superior stance. They

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<sup>14</sup> Gerald G. May, *Will and Spirit*, Ch. 1, Harper & Row, 1982

<sup>15</sup> Gerald G. May, *Will and Spirit*, p.6, Harper & Row, 1982

<sup>16</sup> Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth*, Ch.5, Penguin, 2005

see themselves as privileged and apart – “I am not like the rest of men.” Pride corrodes them. Many get caught in the “blame game.” They refuse to assume responsibility for themselves. They blame their parents, their early life experiences, society at large, anything and everything for their failure to set out on the spiritual journey.

## **LOSING OUR WAY**

Psychological integration requires the facing and integrating of the shadow – those parts of ourselves that we dislike, disown and tend to repress and to project on others. Ken Wilber the contemporary philosopher and transpersonal psychologist claims that meditation methods tend to keep the shadow hidden, that is, they do not bring the shadow into the light of day and as a result block spiritual progress or else we are diverted along pseudo-spiritual paths.<sup>17</sup>

Keating claims that this does not apply to Centering Prayer, certainly not when it includes practices like the Welcoming Prayer where emotions are welcomed and faced.<sup>18</sup> The Welcoming Prayer, like the psychological practice, Focusing, invites us to become aware of the emotions that we are experiencing, to name them, claim them and “let them be.” Claiming them as our own is vital. The shadow is made up of what we refuse to claim as our own, instead we repress it and project it out there on you, on them - you, they, are angry, mean, envious, jealous, proud – not me!

The very method of Centering Prayer encourages the emergence of what is repressed. We let the thoughts come; we let them go. We are open to whatever comes. We release what we have buried within. The unloading of the unconscious is taking place all the time in gentle, subtle ways of which we may not be aware. We are “letting go” of the buried emotional pain. The more dramatic unloading comes to some but can be rare for many.

Yet despite all of this, Wilber has to be taken seriously. If we are not aware and careful, meditation can indeed reinforce the process of disowning and the strengthening of the shadow. Moreover meditation can be used as a means not only of reinforcing the shadow within but also of avoiding the shadow around us – the darkness and pain of life itself.

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<sup>17</sup> Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, Ch.6, Integral Books, 2006

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Keating, *Advanced Training Programme*, White Plains, N.Y., October 2007

There are those who meditate as a means of avoiding the demands of life. They attempt to create and inhabit a kind of perfect inner world in which they cocoon themselves. They do not want to be disturbed from their self created Shangri La; do not want to engage the ugliness and pain within themselves or the frustrations of everyday living. They hide in the illusion of light and love, in a world of self absorption and self indulgence.

They attempt to return to that very first stage of life of oceanic bliss where the infant is at one with the mother and through the mother with the whole natural world; there is no sense of a separate self. They mistake this for the transpersonal stage of union with the Source of all that is. Instead of moving onwards, they regress and remain stuck in the earliest stage of all.

The movement to the transpersonal is onward through the mental egoic, the stage at which we come to a sense of a personal self with mind and will sufficiently developed to be able to assume personal responsibility. The mental egoic stage is like a hinge opening the door from the lower developmental stages to the higher stages of the intuitive, unitive, unity, ultimacy in which we increasingly "let go" to a greater power and a greater will, come to an at-oneness of a different kind and rest in the very ground of being and beyond.<sup>19</sup>

It is perhaps because of this tendency to regress that contemplatives so often remind us that what happens during the time of prayer is not what is of primary importance but what happens afterwards in the business of everyday life. And the everyday life they point to is not one of hiding in a world of illusion but an engagement with life as it is.

As we make the spiritual journey, we have to face the limitations of our humanity, the difficulties of our personality type, the hurdles that our personal life story puts in our way. We will fall and fall again. And, if we have faith, we will rise again and resume the journey to which we have been invited. We make the journey with our imperfect selves in the truth of who we are. We are real.

## **GUIDE/ANGEL**

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<sup>19</sup> Ken Wilber, Jack Engler & Daniel P. Brown, Transformations of Consciousness, p101-105, Shambhala, 1986

At times the journey leads us through the desert as it did the Jews so many years ago. It is not easy to traverse the terrain of the desert on your own. Where do you look for water, where for shade? How do you know when something is real, when a mirage? We need a guide, an angel of the Lord, to point the way. Angels come in unexpected forms.

I was blessed at a particularly dark period of my life when I wandered in the desert for many years to meet a young priest, wise beyond his years, who became for me the cloud by day, the pillar of light by night. He urged me not to fear the darkness; invited me to explore the unknown. He affirmed me; challenged me; awakened potential within me. He turned my life around.

The years of wandering in the desert continued, it is true, there were even times of yearning for the fleshpots of Egypt, but the vision of the Promised Land grew clearer and I learnt that the desert blooms, that there are tiny, seemingly imperceptible signs of life in the vast barrenness. Slowly a new day began to dawn.

We all need Angels to guide us, mentors, spiritual directors, soul friends, whatever term you prefer. We cannot do it on our own. And God sends them. Sometimes we don't recognise them because they may not come in traditional guise, in the way or in the form that we anticipate. Nonetheless they come.

## **VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

At a meeting recently I was asked to state my Vision for the future. I paused, the future? In a sense I have no vision for the future. I have only a commitment to an all embracing Present. For many years I preoccupied myself and wasted time and energy thinking that a building was necessary for the Foundation if it was to continue into the future. I held a monastic model. The Foundation needed a home of its own with a small resident contemplative community, or so I thought. I attempted to identify a suitable building or suitable land. I scoured Woodbrook, St. James, Maraval, Cascade, St. Ann's, Newtown, St. Clair, Belmont – all the surrounding areas of Port of Spain and even further away. I attempted to raise money for the project. It was all a dismal failure. God had other plans.

The early call to set out on the spiritual journey required that I "let go" of youthful dreams and yearnings; it required the exercise of will rather than the satisfaction of desire. The mid years took this to another level. They demanded that I face

again the issues of the past; that I re-engage them and begin the movement towards integration and harmonization.

The early years of the Foundation were again years of stripping; “letting go” this time of people close and dear to me. These latter years have seen another kind of stripping the “letting go” of a treasured dream. The time is ripe for God’s Vision.

Slowly I am learning the difference between willfulness and willing surrender. Willingness requires that we rest in another level of the self, a level where we are not controlled by the instinctual drives and the desires to which they give rise. There can be no willingness without both the spirit and the practice of detachment.

## **INTERNAL MONASTERY**

Perhaps the finger of God is pointing not to a building and a permanent place of abode for the Foundation but to an internal monastery within the minds and hearts of each of us. Perhaps God is calling you and me, to create a monastery within ourselves, a place of stillness and silence alive with God’s Presence. As we deepen our relationship with Him, instead of withdrawal from the world, perhaps he is urging us to greater intentional involvement in the world. Perhaps He is asking us to keep alive His Presence in the midst of the hurly burly of contemporary life, caring for family, pursuing careers, serving in the public arena. Perhaps he is nudging us to challenge the values and mores of contemporary society and to challenge them not out of the surface self but from the deep stillness of His Presence within us.

But as Gerald May reminds us, “An internal monastery is very difficult to establish in a culture that is constantly subverting surrender”.<sup>20</sup> What we are being called to is no easy matter. An internal monastery calls for fidelity to contemplative prayer, contemplative practices, contemplative living and contemplative service on a daily basis. It requires, above all, surrender to the Living God and the willingness to rest in Him in the centre of our soul. May we have the love, the courage and the spirit of joy to take up the challenge!

And so my dear friends, I would like to end by making the prayer of St. Paul for the Ephesians my prayer for you, my companions on the spiritual journey.

“This is what I pray, kneeling before the Father....:

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<sup>20</sup> Gerald G. May, *Care of Mind Care of Spirit*, p.67, Harper Collins, 1992

Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God...Amen."<sup>21</sup>

Sr. Paul D'Ornellas,  
Ortinola, Maracas Valley, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2008

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<sup>21</sup> Ephesians 3:14-21