

Thoughts on Contemplative Prayer

After attending the 2004 Shalem Regional Gathering at Holyoke

I raised a question at the gathering about the intersection between personality type and contemplative practice. The conference was not a time for discussion, but I have continued to think a lot about it since.

As a part of our vocational process at Life/Work Direction, we introduce participants to the Enneagram. It is the single most affecting experience of the entire six to nine months that a person is with us. The Enneagram is based, broadly speaking, on the interplay of mind, heart, and gut—thinking, feeling, instinct—in each type. The focus of the retreat on each of those areas of experience was helpful. In my individual work with those seeking a deeper spiritual life, the Enneagram type always comes to the fore as one avenue of opening to God's work. So I saw the connection with the way contemplative practice was dealt with at the gathering. I found all three areas accessed in myself—thinking, feeling, instinctual response.

I know that the Myers Briggs is a tool frequently used in various kinds of work, and with effectiveness. What is sometimes missing in the use of the Myers Briggs is attention to the development of one's opposite modes, and instead becomes a way of labeling a person and helping them stay stuck in familiar patterns. (Thus, the excuse, "I'm an Introvert," or "I'm an Intuitive Feeler," without a realization of how this leaves one prey to powerful shadow forces when extroversion or thinking and sensation are called for.)

The Enneagram, likewise, may be used to mire a person more deeply in his/her compulsions. ("I'm an Eight," or "I'm a Seven,") But the Enneagram probes a deeper layer than the Myers Briggs, and is very powerful. Richard Rohr considers the Enneagram to be especially useful in the spiritual experience of "descent"—into probing inner layers of the personality, one's "deadly sins." Contemplative practice, although it includes acknowledgment of the dark night of the soul, moves toward the "ascent."

Welwood speaks of "spiritual bypassing," by which he is referring to the tendency of some persons to attempt to achieve some transpersonal state of altered consciousness through spiritual practices like meditation, without having done the necessary psychological work of coming to terms with the self. I wondered about this as I consider how contemplative spirituality may begin to be a more conscious part of my own life and work.

Interestingly enough, this morning's homily at the monastery dealt with contemplative prayer. It was helpful to hear the Brother emphasize the place of the disciplines

(meditation, saying the Office, Scripture) support the practice of contemplative prayer. I needed that reminder after a week of truly nourishing experience in the silence.

There didn't seem to be a place to bring up some of these thoughts at the gathering, so I am choosing to write this note as my "coda" on the experience.

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