

Session 7 – Briege O'Hare Clare of Assisi Retreat, August 2005 – Stella Niagara

This topic is one of these topics where I have to preface by saying that if you don't know what contemplation is, by the end of this session you are not going to be any wiser! The reason is because no one can tell you what contemplation is; all they can do is hint at it. I'm going to try my best.

We began this retreat with the theme of Clare as light. We looked at this theme from the perspective of our own calling as human beings to be men and women of light. We also looked at Bonaventure's Prologue to the Major Life of Francis where he says, "the Most High gave Francis as a light for believers that by bearing witness to the Light he might prepare for the Lord a way of light and peace in the heart of God's faithful." I believe in these words are our mission as Franciscan men and women. We prepare the way of peace. Jesus came for that reason – the announcing of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth," and after the resurrection, Jesus said, "My peace I give you." Peace comes from living in the light.

In the prologue of John's gospel we are told about Jesus and we are told that Jesus was with God in the beginning and through him all things came to be, that is, through the Christ, not one thing had its being but through him and all that came to be had life in him and that life was the light of humans, a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower.

That word overpower can also be translated as a light that the darkness cannot grasp or understand. I don't believe I was exaggerating last night when I said that I believe that our survival as a human race depends upon our capacity to recover the contemplative dimension of ourselves. The reason I don't believe that to be an exaggeration is because it is only in that dimension of ourselves that we will inhabit our true being as humans. We are beings of light, we are beings of love. John said in his first letter, those are the two definitions of the Divine – God is light and God is love. The coming of Jesus was a breakthrough in human consciousness. Into the discovery that we are light and we are love. He said that, "I am the light. You are the light." Out in the world we can observe the opposite. We can observe the forces of darkness, whatever they are. They are the dark forces in the human unconscious. And they are raging everywhere. But they are not just out there, they are here. They are in each of us.

Contemplation is the way through which we move from the dark forces into the light in ourselves. The question of course is how do we go about this process? We looked yesterday at two of Clare's letters, the fourth letter in which we looked at our true nature in God, Lady Poverty as our true divine being, and the second letter to see how fidelity to the voice of the Spirit comes before everything else for us as human beings. We saw how Clare demonstrated that in her second letter to Agnes. Now we're going to use her third letter to Agnes as the basic text. She is speaking about contemplation. Before we go to her letter, I want to throw out into the air some descriptions and definitions and words about contemplation so that we have some sense of what human thinking about contemplation is around it.

One of my favorite writers on the topic of contemplation is Thomas Merton. He wrote a book a very long time ago that I'm sure you all are familiar with The Seeds of Contemplation. It is still a great classic, a marvelous work to get a language about this thing. He tells us what contemplation is not. He begins by saying, "One who does not actually know in her own life, the nature of this breakthrough in the experience of contemplation, and this awakening to a new level of reality, cannot help being misled by most of the things that are said about it." Many weird things are said about contemplation. Unfortunately, I have to say it is women in the Second Order who are most to blame. Merton says contemplation cannot be taught. It cannot even be clearly explained. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized. The more

objectively and scientifically one tries to analyze it the more we empty it of its real content. For this experience is beyond the reach of verbalization and of rationalization and because of that, my trying to verbalize this is a bit of a contradiction.

Merton says that contemplation is always beyond our own knowledge, beyond our own light, beyond systems, beyond explanations, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self. To enter into the realm of contemplation one must in a certain sense die, but this death is in fact the entrance into a higher life. It is a death for the sake of life which leaves behind all that we can know or treasure as life, as thought, as experience, as joy, as being. This sounds very, very negative. I don't experience Merton as at all negative. I think he is very liberating as a writer. Our prayer this morning calling us to awaken to the beauty of life is very much a contemplative reality. If we have within us this light connecting with light in creation than that is it. The external form of creation is beautiful but it is an external form of an inner reality which is the light of the Divine.

Merton says that contemplation is not just the affair of a passive and quiet temperament, it is not mere inertia, a tendency to inactivity or to psychic peace. The contemplative is not merely a person who likes to sit and think, still less one who sits around with a vacant stare. There is a lovely section in an old English document, The Cloud of Unknowing, we don't know who wrote it, but there is a marvelous passage describing the false contemplative. It's a description of a person who puts on all these holy expressions. It's ridiculing such a person because it is none of these things.

Contemplation is much more than thoughtfulness, or a taste for reflection. It is not prayerfulness; it is very important that we understand that. Prayerfulness is nice if you are that way inclined but of itself it is not contemplation. It is not a tendency to find peace and satisfaction in liturgical rites. (In Rome once, there were two young friars there and we were having lunch and I happened to be sitting with them. They were telling me that they had just been on holidays in Wales. While they were there someone had told them that there was a very holy woman, a hermit, somewhere in the Welsh mountains. These two young fellows thought, let's go and find her and meet this holy person who has a great reputation for sanctity. She was a hermit. Eventually, after hours of searching they found their way up this little path to a little cottage and she was there. She received them very graciously, took them in, gave them a share of the food that she had and they had long extended conversations about spiritual matters which they found fascinating. These two men then thought how can we give her something back? Maybe we can offer to say Mass with her. I wondered how she would react to that 'I can give you something you don't have.' When I asked, "what did she say?" They answered, "That was the strange thing! She said, "No thanks. I was there last Easter and that will do me for a while!" (They were very shocked; I was secretly very delighted.) She was a mystic, a contemplative, it's not about finding satisfaction in liturgical rites.

Merton goes on extensively, and attempts to tell us what contemplation is. He does not give many words about what it is because it is easier to say what it is not. I will try to share what he says that contemplation is. He says that contemplation is the highest expression of a person's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, and fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant source. Now the prayer we had from all of you this week was constantly reflecting that for me. Contemplation is above all things awareness of the reality of the source. It knows the Source of Being – obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond both reason and simple faith. I think it is a marvelous description of what the contemplative experience is.

Gerald May, in his book Will and Spirit, speaks about the fact that in all the religious traditions, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, especially the Eastern traditions but also in our Western mystics, there is a consciousness, a realization that all energy, all energy of which all matter is a manifestation we know scientifically. But the mystics go a step further that all energy originates in pure love. Pure love is the essence of all that exists. Everything that exists starts out as pure love. I as a human being am in my essence pure love. My experience of myself is not that. I think it's that until I get irritated by somebody. The pure love somehow disappears. This is because this pure love which is the essence of my being, (this is my recollection of what Gerald May says.) has to be processed each time through my psychological story. By the time it gets out there it can be somewhat tarnished. It's less than pure love. It's energy sometimes transforms into a negative energy, of destruction. But it is still originated as pure love. The evil deeds that we see going on in the world, and this is the blasphemy of them, they all originate in those human beings as pure love. But because of our way of consciousness, or our psychological story it gets corrupted on its way out, so to speak. To be a contemplative is to go into the essence again of ourselves, to that pure love which each one is and to inhabit it. The problem is you can't think yourself into it. You can't do that.

Clare gives us a kind of process for that in her third letter. This is her experience of what she does to enter into it. You're so familiar with this that you probably know it by heart. She seems to speak of three steps, a three faceted dynamic that's operative when we are at contemplation. She says first of all about the mind, what happens to the mind. She says, "Place your mind before the mirror of eternity." I have heard many Poor Clares interpreting this who say that what she means is to look at Jesus, he is the mirror of eternity. That is not what I read into it, it's not what I experience. When I go to contemplation every morning the first thing I have to do is something with my mind because it's all over the place. I'm wondering what I should cook today for the community. I'm remembering an email I should have done yesterday. My mind is all over the place. I have to find a way to shift my preoccupation of my mind with the immediate. Everybody finds that in a different way. Many methods exist; if you find one that is helpful, do it. Some people use a mantra. I have never found a mantra helpful; it doesn't suit me. Somehow preoccupation with the mind has to be shifted out; our preoccupation with the immediate has to be moved. I find Teresa of Avila very good on this. She has an almost attractive language. I am reading from a book on her life, chapter 15, "What the soul must do during these times of quiet amounts to no more than proceeding gently and noiselessly. What I call noise is running about with the intellect looking for many words and reflections so as to give thanks for this gift and piling up ones sins and faults in order to see that the gift is unmerited." So she's talking about people who are preoccupied with themselves. "In this situation everything is motion. The intellect is representing, the memory is hurrying about; these faculties tire me out. Although I have a poor memory, I cannot subdue it. The will calmly and wisely must understand that one does not deal well with God by force and that our efforts are like the careless use of large pieces of wood that smother this little spark.

Once you realize this you say, Lord, what am I capable of here? What has the servant to do with the Lord, or earth with heaven, or other words of this kind that come to mind out of love and are well grounded in the knowledge that what is said is the truth? One should pay no attention to the intellect for it is a grinding mill. It is better that the will leave the intellect alone rather than go after it, let it wander around and that it (your will and your desire) remain like a wise bee in the recollection and enjoyment of the gift. For if no bee were to enter the beehive and each were employed in going after the other, no honey would be made." So the calming of the mind is the first thing we have to do not by trying to control it or pull it back but by finding a method that moves us into a deeper level of consciousness. It can be music, it can be dancing, tai chi, yoga, and mantras – whatever. It doesn't matter. Do something that gets you into a deeper, more calmer way of consciousness. I am telling you that because that is what I find helpful. I often

find just some quiet music; something that doesn't absorb my mind, what we call ambient style music is often very helpful.

Once you've done that you "place your soul in the brilliance of glory." Now what does she mean by that?! Later in this third Letter she writes about the soul. She says, "Who would not dread the treacheries of the enemy of humanity who through the arrogance of momentary and deceptive glories attempt to reduce to nothing that which is greater than heaven itself. It is now clear that the soul of a faithful person, the most worthy of all creatures because of the grace of God, is greater than heaven itself since the heavens and the rest of creation cannot contain their Creator and only the faithful soul is God's dwelling place and throne." This is her language. I understand it to mean to try to connect not so much with consciousness but simply being in the beauty of one's own being. This is the essence of one's being which is love. We don't do it by thinking about it because it's not in the mind. It just is not in the mind. This is hard, even impossible to explain. But it is easy to know; it's very easy to know. You just 'are' in life.

Thomas Merton was asked when he went up to his hermitage, spending days up there, "What do you do all the time?" I can't remember his exact words but he said I wear trousers and I listen to the wind in the trees. I think that was about all he said. I think he was wonderful because essentially he was inhabiting a sense of being, a sense of being in the reality of God, of the Divine, which is his own essence and the essence of all creation. This is what Clare is talking about. Now who wouldn't "dread the treachery of the enemy of humanity" however you understand that? Something keeps pulling us into the mind and into a lesser self, the ego, which is just a little puny nothing compared to our true being which is infinitely expansive and beautiful.

There is a lovely story told in the life of St. Francis when Cardinal Hugolino wanted to speak with him and he came to the friary. As was Francis' custom, he always had a little hut someplace away where he would go for contemplation and prayer. He always left instructions that under no circumstances was he to be disturbed because if you have any sense at all that someone is going to intrude upon you, you cannot enter into this state of being. You cannot, because you are shedding a lot of your external being and your vulnerability is exposed before God. So you can't have somebody stepping in on that. Francis always left that instruction.

Hugolino comes along and he wants to see Francis on some matter. So the friar who had "door duty" said I'm sorry, he's at prayer; he can't be disturbed. The cardinal said, "I'm Cardinal Hugolino" meaning of course you can disturb him. The poor friar gets a bit uncomfortable and he says you can't disturb him, he's at prayer; we never do that. So Cardinal Hugolino asks where is he praying? He's in a hut down there but please don't disturb him. The Cardinal says but he won't mind me. (I'm the Cardinal.) He really presumed an intimacy with Francis that he wasn't entitled to. So he goes off down and lifts the little latch on the door and opens it and he finds himself thrown about twenty feet through the air with a blast of energy that just lifts him off the ground and sends him whizzing. I don't know if that is historically true or not, but it's relevant. The spirit of a man like Francis would be such that when you move into prayer your whole spiritual being begins to expand beyond your body. This is something that is very simple. There is no big deal about it. You just have a sense of spaciousness, of expansion of being something more than this physical limitation of the body and the mind. It is simply being who we are, our essence. Probably with the spirit that Francis of Assisi had, the energy would have been such that it filled that little hut. Once you opened the door the energy would have blasted out and sent Cardinal Hugolino flying! Whether this is metaphorical thing or not, it is an interesting story about what Clare is talking about. Contemplation is the time of moving into our essential being which is pure love. Pure love fills the entire universe. That's

what Clare means. She talks about the fact that the whole of creation cannot contain the Creator. Only the human spirit can, because it expands to the infinite.

Now when I'm at contemplation I'm not even thinking about being expanded to the infinite. That is completely irrelevant. When I'm at contemplation I just am in the beauty of my own being. This is why it is wonderful when you have these prayers every morning. What has struck me and what has been lovely for me is that there has not been a lot of religion in them. It's reality; it's life, and that's true religion. God is in all of life. That is the true contemplative way. Religion is a constricted thing and we don't need it beyond a formative time. It's helpful then but not beyond that.

Listen to Clare's language. She says, "He who is the Truth says the one who loves me will be loved by my Father and I too shall love her and we shall come to her and make our dwelling place within her." Clare speaks of Mary carrying Jesus in her body and she says that "we too, without any doubt, carry God spiritually in our bodies, holding God by whom you and all things are held together." In other words, within ourselves is contained the whole of reality. It is a mystery that we don't find words for. Contemplation is simply entering not so much into the consciousness of it as the being of it. Now how do you do it?

The third thing Clare says is "Put your heart in the figure of the divine substance. Transform your entire being into the image of God through contemplation." The figure of the divine substance is for Clare, Jesus Christ. He is the way; he is the means of expanding our hearts because he is the Source of Divine Love in human consciousness, in the whole of humanity. I don't think it is easy to say, you do this or you do that. All I can say is "just do it!" All I can say is "do it every day." Eventually, if it is not already your experience, something will start to happen. Clare speaks of being transformed into the image of the Divine. We already are the image of the Divine. But to be transformed means to come into an awareness that pure love is what is starting to filter through us, instead of our psychological mess ups. It doesn't mean we don't have to do our psychological work, we do. We all have the responsibility to do that. Just as we take care of our physical body we have to do our psychological work for the sake of each other. There is a lot of darkness in the human unconscious, a lot of darkness, and all the forces of darkness in the human unconscious manifest outwardly in the destruction and the evil that's in this world. These are manifest outwardly in the ways we treat each other, and they manifest outwardly in the way we think about ourselves. Contemplation is the only way into the light. The world needs above all else to be brought into the light. We as Franciscan men and women among others are called to be the light for the world.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus talks about this light, "Let your light so shine that when people see your good works, (see what you do), they will glorify your Father in heaven. What he means is that people will say there is something beyond the human here, there is light beyond the human as they understand the human. There is something greater here; they will see the divine coming through us. That is what he means – 'let your light so shine.' If people are just impressed by us then we are not doing the gospel. We are just impressing people. We don't have a ministry, we have a career. Somehow when people connect with us they have to be somewhat puzzled. What is it about this woman or this man, there is a beauty emanating that is more than just human. Now I say 'just human' but actually, it is what human is. People have to discover that about themselves.

As I told you, you aren't going to be any wiser! We need at least to open up this topic. The only answer is faithfulness to the practice. Just find a place where you know you won't be disturbed, no phones, nothing. You decide on how much time you can manage. Decide 'I am just going to be there.' Create some sacred sign for yourself if you need an external sign. Find somewhere you can be every day, as a norm and just sit there. Maybe you can manage twenty minutes. Just sit there. Don't try to think holy; don't worry about

that. Sometimes an icon is very helpful if you are inclined that way. Just sitting before it. Don't try to force anything. Just sit there. And do it every single day and I promise you your life will be transformed. That is what Clare said, transform your entire being through contemplation. I have no hesitation in promising it because when God gets God's moment, which is only that twenty minutes in your day when you stop God starts to move in very, very gently, but it happens. Believe me it happens. You don't have to feel you have achieved anything. If you feel it's a waste of time every day, that's not a problem. That's alright; it's a good thing to waste time for a while. Just do it. Please, if you aren't already doing it. Just do it!

What we are going to have as our last song is Clare's words on contemplation. Clare invites us to gaze upon Christ, that is, to look into the mirror of your own divine nature, the beauty of that. The song is "Gaze Upon the Lord." It is taken from this letter of Clare as she speaks about gazing, contemplating and allowing God to transform us into our true being. She does speak about being vulnerable before God, allowing the pain of life to come up and just be there, because all of that is the material of God's transforming work. Just sit back and let Clare have the last word!

Questions for reflection

1. Why is contemplative prayer necessary in our lives?
2. "The heart is the depth of a person." What is the meaning of this to you?
3. How best can I/we purify my/our hearts?