

The Ordinary Kinds Of Thoughts

From: Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel - Chapter Six
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The great battle in the early stages of contemplative prayer is with droughts. It is important to recognize the various kinds of thoughts and thought patterns that come down the stream of consciousness and to learn the best way to handle each kind.

The easiest variety of thoughts to recognize is the ordinary wanderings of the imagination. The imagination is a perpetual motion faculty and is constantly grinding away. It is unrealistic to aim at having no thoughts. When we speak of developing interior silence, we are speaking of a relative degree of silence. By interior silence we refer primarily to a state in which we do not become attached to the thoughts as they go by.

Suppose you are conversing with someone on the seventh floor of a downtown office building with the windows wide open. There is a constant hum of traffic from the street. Obviously you cannot do anything to prevent the noise from continuing. If you get annoyed and say, "Why don't they keep quiet? or get in the elevator and go downstairs and start shouting, "Why don't you people shut up?" you will only succeed in bringing your conversation to an end. If you just continue your conversation and put up with the hum, you will gradually develop a capacity to pay no attention to it. This is the best solution for the wanderings of the imagination. Make up your mind that they are going to be present as part of the reality of your inner world. If you fully accept them, they will begin to fade into insignificance.

Once in a while, however, the hubbub gets louder, say at the rush hour, and the decibels increase to an unbearable degree. You have to accept that too. Sometimes you will be persecuted from start to finish by the wanderings and ravings of the imagination. That does not mean that your prayer was no good or that you did not benefit from some degree of interior silence. As you persevere, you will gradually develop new habits and new capacities, one of which is the ability to be conscious of two levels of awareness at the same time. You can be aware of the noise in or around you, and yet you recognize that your attention is grasped by something at a deeper level that is impossible to define but is nonetheless real.

The ability to build a wall around your interior silence during this prayer is a phenomenon that you may experience fairly soon in regard to external sounds. If you frilly accept the noise, it scarcely bothers you. If you fight it, struggle with it, or wish it were not there, you will get all wrapped up in particular sounds. Although you may not succeed right away, eventually you will experience a delightful silence at a deep level even though noise is going on around you.

I once visited a family who lived over the Third Avenue El in New York shortly before it was taken down. Their apartment overlooked the tracks. Every now and then a train would roar by. For me the din was absolutely shattering. I thought the train was going right through the living room. But the family seemed to be blissfully unaware of it. They would be chatting away and when a train would come, everybody just stopped talking because it was impossible to be heard. After the train went by, they took up the conversation exactly where they left off as though nothing had happened. They had built the deafening sound into their lives. But for some one who was not used to it, it was not only an interruption but the end of the conversation.

So it is with the rumbling that goes on in our heads. It is so bad sometimes that many people will not put up with it. They say, "Interior silence and contemplative prayer are for the birds. I cannot endure this barrage of tiresome thoughts going through my head. So they get up and leave. If they would just hang on and give themselves a little more time, they would get used to the noise.

The habitual practice of centering prayer gradually reduces the amount of interior noise. In the beginning you are bound to be bombarded by thoughts without end. Most of us, before we begin the method of centering prayer or some other process of quieting the mind, are not even aware of how many thoughts we actually have. But when we start to quiet down, we begin to realize the amazing amount of

nonsense stored in our heads. Some people may even get a little scared by how much is going on in there. They find they would rather put up with the ordinary flow of their superficial thoughts.

We should set up conditions that are most conducive for our prayer: find a quiet time of the day away from phones and other foreseeable interruptions. Take the advice of Jesus when he speaks of praying in secret to the Father. If you have a bunch of youngsters running around the house, it may be hard to find a quiet spot or time. For some people the only quiet place may be in the bathtub. In any case, you should find a spot and a time where and when you are least likely to be interrupted. Some noises, like lawn mowers or airplane engines, can be integrated into interior silence, but noises that engage the intellect and imagination, such as loud conversation, are hard to handle.

To sum up, the best response to the ordinary wanderings of the imagination is to ignore them; not, however, with a feeling of annoyance or anxiety, but with one of acceptance and peace. Every response to God, whatever it is, must begin with the full acceptance of reality as it actually is at the moment. Since it is part of our nature to have a wandering imagination, however much you might want to be quiet, accept the fact that thoughts are certain to come. The solution is not to try to make the mind a blank. That is not what interior silence is.

During the entire course of a period of centering prayer, we are slipping in and out of interior silence. One's interior attention is like a balloon on a calm day slowly settling to the ground. Just as it is about to touch the ground, a zephyr comes from nowhere and the balloon starts to go up again. Similarly, in centering prayer there is a tantalizing moment when one feels about to slip into the most delightful silence. That is just the moment that some unwanted thought comes along. It takes great patience to accept the thought and not to be sad because one is prevented from entering that silence. Just start over. This constant starting over with patience, calm, and acceptance trains us for the acceptance of the whole of life. It prepares us for action. There should be a basic acceptance of whatever is actually happening before we decide what to do with it. Our first reflex is to want to change reality or at least to control it.

A second kind of thought that comes down the stream of consciousness during this prayer occurs when, in the course of the wanderings of the imagination, you get interested in some particular thought and notice your attention moving in that direction. You may also feel yourself getting emotionally involved in it.

Any emotionally charged thought or image, whether it comes from outside or from our imagination, initiates an automatic response in the appetitive system. Depending on whether the image is pleasant or unpleasant, you feel a spontaneous like or dislike for it. When you notice that there is curiosity in a particular thought or a clinging sensation, the proper response is to return to the sacred word. This reaffirms your original intention of opening to God and of surrendering to Him.

Our consciousness, as we have said, is like a great river on the surface of which our superficial thoughts and experiences are moving by like boats, debris, water skiers or other things. The river itself is the participation God has given us in His own being. It is that part of us on which all the other faculties rest, but we are ordinarily unaware of it because we are absorbed with what is passing by on the surface of the river.

In centering prayer we begin to shift our attention from the boats and objects on the surface to the river itself, to that which sustains all our faculties and is their source. The river in this analogy has no qualities or characteristics. It is spiritual and limitless because it is a participation in God's being. Suppose you get interested in some boat and find yourself looking in the hold to see what is on board. You are slipping away from your original intention. You must keep turning your attention from what is on the surface of the river to the river itself, from the particular to the general, from forms to the formless, from images to the imageless. Returning to the sacred word is a way of renewing your intention to seek God's inward presence in faith.

Let's return to the image of conversing with a friend on the seventh floor in a downtown office building. At the rush hour horns begin to honk. You start no wonder what is going on, so your attention is drawn away from the conversation with your friend. Courtesy requires that you renew your attention. So you turn your gaze toward your friend as if to say, "Excuse me," or, as I was saying. In other words, a simple

movement to reaffirm your conversation is called for. It is not a question of fighting, stopping or shutting out the noise, but of returning to your original intention. In similar fashion, when, in centering prayer, you notice that you are thinking some other thought, simply give your attention back to God, and as a sign of your intention, think the sacred word.

There is no question of repeating the sacred word as if it were a magic formula to empty the mind or to force the word upon your consciousness. By returning to the sacred word, you reaffirm your choice to converse with God and to be united to Him. This does not demand effort but surrender. Thus whenever you return to the sacred word, do so without exasperation or desperation. Over-reacting is counterproductive. No one cuts a lawn with a bulldozer. All you need to brush away a fly is a movement of your hand. In centering prayer the patient renewal of your intention is sufficient activity.

There are all kinds of ways in which God speaks to us, through our thoughts or any one of our faculties. But keep in mind that God's first language is silence. Prepare yourself for silence in this prayer, and if other things happen, that is His problem, not yours. As soon as you make it your problem, you tend to desire something that is other than God. Pure faith will bring you closer to God than anything else. To be attached to an experience of God is not God; it is a thought. The time of centering prayer is the time to let go of all thoughts, even the best of thoughts. If they are really good, they will come back later.