

Contemplative Living: A Compass(ion)

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Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all.

—*Morning prayer of a bodhisattva.*

These words of the Zen teacher have been serving as a kind of koan from the time I heard them in my concluding interview. He had asked me why I came for the retreat; why did I choose to “sit” in silence for eight hours a day; why would I enter into the discipline of pain of doing nothing? As he spoke I was mentally adding other questions: What is a Sister of Mercy doing by just sitting? How can I set aside so much time for myself when there are so many needs in our world, not to speak of the incomplete projects on my desk at home? Remembrances of my novitiate training replayed tapes about how a Sister of Mercy does not spend too much time “with her sleeves on” but “pins up her skirts” and tends to the needs of others. There I sat before the teacher, struggling again with the elusive balance of duties of Mary and Martha.

Contemplation is compassion

Our interview continued. Why do I engage in prayer? There were some obvious practical explanations I could give for types of prayer such as intercessory prayer, scripture-based prayer, liturgical prayer, guided imagery, chant, and the like. But the prayer of just sitting? In reply to the teacher, I explained that I have been drawn to a quiet type of prayer for many years because I sense it is a way to a direct experience of deepest reality and with this comes enlightenment and with enlightenment comes wholeness and with wholeness comes fulfillment of God’s design. The teacher nodded in agreement, but led me a step further. He recounted how most who come to him to learn the art of Zen come seeking happiness, the end of their suffering, the liberating experience of knowing truth. That is, they come for themselves. But the only way that they will continue in the practice of Zen is to take a second step, and that is to sit for others, to be with others, all others, in utter simplicity. The reason for Zen sitting is compassion.

“How is this?” I asked. “I can understand being compassionate in my attitude towards others, and in my service to others in need, and in my prayers for others. But how is the prayer of no-mind, what I call contemplative prayer, compassion?” He responded with an example. “Let us say that you began your practice of Zen today with a sadness coming from something that is going on now in your life. In your sitting that sadness fills your mind and body. It makes ‘clear mind’ impossible. How are you going to let go of that sadness and just sit? Simply pay attention to it.

Be with the sadness that is the only reality here and now. Don’t analyze it or go back to its supposed cause or circumstances. Simply realize the sadness that is there right before you. It is all you have; it is all you are. That sadness is the sadness of the whole world. Breathe it in, breathe it out. In this single-mindedness you will find the healing of sadness, yours and the whole world’s.”

The teacher continued. “We make this vow each morning: ‘Sentient beings are numberless. We vow to save them all.’ How is this possible? Certainly not by individual acts, but by sitting. In this practice one gets to the root of all that is, moment by moment. When one puts aside the measuring mind, all falls away but one thing: compassion. Everything is one: your suffering and my suffering, your need and my need, your song and my song. All divisions are relativized. All becomes one and the salvation of all is realized for that moment. This is our vowed life.”

I left the interview astonished. I had just heard one of the most profound teachings about the purpose and meaning of my life as a Sister of Mercy.

Later on during my retreat, I asked the teacher how Zen could stop the war in the Persian Gulf, which for me was a global example of the disunities within each of us. Can just sitting bring world peace? Can prayer be a work of mercy?

He answered: “Both Saddam Hussein and President Bush want Kuwait. This is a dilemma. Shall it be given to the one or the other, or perhaps cut in two, as Solomon proposed to do with the baby presented to him? What do you think should be done?” He waited for me to answer.

I came up with solutions that dealt with political action to be taken to change our foreign policy, by which we think we are the police of the world, or to advocate an economic policy which would free us from reliance on imported oil. I spoke of making a choice myself of simplifying my own lifestyle in the belief that it is the consumerism of the U.S. which is at the root of our action in the Gulf. He just shook his head and said, “You are treating the symptoms. This is what you can do. Drink a cup of tea with a friend.” The interview ended with that.

I am still trying to comprehend the full meaning of his words (a foolish thing to do with Zen teaching!). But they reminded me so much of Catherine’s commendation to make sure that the Sisters all had a comfortable cup of tea when she was gone. Just be with. Do mercy by paying attention to your breathing, by being with a friend, by drinking a cup of tea, “and no exterior action should separate us from Him.” The center of the compass is compassion.

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