

Trauma and Spirituality

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Following the Vietnam War, a mental health industry developed to deal with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and related phenomena. After September 11, 2001, and with the return of many physically and emotionally wounded survivors of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the need for therapists trained in dealing with traumatized individuals has increased and in its wake the vigorous promotion and marketing of medication and uncomplicated therapeutic techniques.

Judith Herman, whose 1992 book, *Trauma and Recovery*, is still one of the best contributions to the field, was asked, a year before 9/11, about her concerns related to the growth and growing respectability of the trauma field. The challenge, she said, is to foster research that does not ignore the 'murky, messy, social issues' related to trauma. The most interesting questions "lie in those areas that we don't understand, yet that are so murky and so confusing and so emotionally laden and so riddled with

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controversy that if you want to get research funding you probably should stay way from there.”¹ It is my thesis that one of these interesting areas is the contribution that spirituality can make to dealing with and recovering from trauma.

Such spirituality needs to be informed since it is all too easy to keep it in a separate compartment, given our cultural conditioning to separate science and religion. A healthy spirituality, therefore, is not compartmentalized but makes critical use of relevant contributions and insights of the human sciences that have added to our understanding of human flourishing. At the same time, such spirituality needs to provide a meta-perspective, which is to say a coherent theology or philosophy to understand these contributions and insights in a larger context.

There was a time, not more than fifteen or twenty years ago, when many of us believed that the incidence of traumatic experiences suffered through relational, societal, and war-inflicted abuse was decreasing. The perilous conflict between East and West appeared to be defused with the fall of the Soviet Empire, major armed conflicts seemed to be diminishing, and there was a growing awareness of abuse in families and relationships and a greater motivation to treat both its victims and its perpetrators. That expectation has now been shattered, and the need for a relevant, life-enhancing, and meaning-conveying spirituality is now more urgent than ever.

DEFINING TRAUMA AND SPIRITUALITY

The Greek word “trauma” means wound. In our time the word “trauma” has come to describe an extremely distressing and harrowing personal or communal experience that exceeds our normal abilities to cope. Traumatic experiences can leave us feeling overwhelmed, emotionally flooded, disoriented, unsure of ourselves, no longer able to trust others or our ability to perceive reality correctly. Experiences of trauma can result in what has become known as posttraumatic stress disorder or what Judith Herman more accurately calls “complex post-traumatic stress disorder” because “the responses to trauma are best understood as a spectrum of conditions rather than as a single disorder.”²

Complex posttraumatic stress disorders are characterized by a wide variety of symptoms, such as dissociation, hyper-vigilance, hyper-arousal, agoraphobia, apathy, loss of interest, isolation and withdrawal, amnesia,

obsessive thinking, difficulty with impulse control, anger and rage outbursts, self-destructive behavior, suicidal ideation, psychosomatic illnesses, and identity problems, to name the more frequent ones.

Past traumatic experiences can also be activated suddenly and unexpectedly by something that happens in the present that acts as a trigger. This is what I have come to call trauma reactivation. Sometimes these triggers are obvious but often they are subtle and not easily named or detected.

Spirituality has become so popular and is used to describe so many different phenomena that it is rapidly becoming a “rubber fence word” that can include almost anything. For example, spirituality is used with regard to meaning, values, self-transcendence, connecting and becoming.³ The word “spirituality”—as opposed to the adjective “spiritual,” which occurs frequently in the New Testament—is of rather recent origin. As far as we know, its first use in English appears to have been in 1583 to refer to clerical abuses resulting from stipendiary appointments that allowed clergy to neglect the spiritual needs of their parishioners. Only later did spirituality acquire the meaning of devotion or piety and the intention to have what we believe reflected in our daily behavior and conduct.⁴

My use of the word “spirituality” is shaped by Christian faith and practice, especially as it is evidenced in early Church writings. The current renewed interest in the faith of Christians during the first millennium has profoundly influenced my own formation. From this perspective, Christian spirituality encompasses more than meaning, values, transcendence, connecting, and becoming. It describes a faith that is grounded in a theological perspective, motivated by regular spiritual practice, and manifested, as best we can, in our daily life. Put simply, Christian spirituality is lived faith.

SURPRISED BY NEW DISCOVERIES OF OLD IDEAS

I discovered to my great surprise that the early Christian tradition has much to contribute to understanding our current situation. The early Church was both an embattled minority before 325 C.E. and a state sanctioned religion that came to be called Christendom following Emperor Constantine’s conversion. Even though we are in our time witnessing the collapse of Christendom, there still is, as we can see around us daily especially in the United States, much triumphalistic Christianity. My ‘surprise’ occurred

about twenty years ago when I had all but given up on the relevance of theology to daily life. Theology seemed too much like “disembodied rationalism.” This disillusionment was hastened by my encounter with psychology and psychotherapy, which offered concrete help with my problems, and much later with Buddhism.

My encounter with Buddhism first showed me the importance and beneficial results of regular spiritual practice. I was particularly informed by its insights into the illuminating and liberating practice of mindfulness as a royal path to awakening to reality, that is to say cultivating a non-judgmental and compassionate openness to whatever takes place at the moment. Practitioners and teachers, like Thich Nhat Hanh, Pema Chödrön, Mark Epstein, B. Alan Wallace, and others, have taught me a great deal.⁵ I include in this list the informative Buddhist quarterly *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*.

It was not until years later that I discovered the truth of what the eminent church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan (1923–2006), once said about the Christian tradition:

Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so that all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition.⁶

My own recovery of tradition, in the way that Pelikan described it, came about with the rediscovery of the living faith of people who were important to me during the Second World War in South East Asia.

I discovered that it is not possible to have a living faith without a theologically informed disposition that is formed in dialogue with those in the present and those who have gone before. Spirituality from this perspective requires both a coherent philosophical meta-perspective, a theology in my case, that can be used as a map or lens or point of reference to help discern what is going on in us and around us. It must also include an awareness of our own experiences with the Numinous, no matter how brief or fleeting they may have been. Living spirituality also calls for participation in a community of those committed to a similar journey, regular spiritual practice, and help from others who have been on the path, usually in the form of spiritual direction or friendship.

THE GIFT OF A CRISIS: DETACHMENT

What all religious traditions appear to have in common—and this is certainly true of Christianity and Buddhism—is their insistence on the central importance of detachment as a spiritual practice. Detachment means freedom from the myriad thoughts, feelings, moods, ideologies, anxieties, worries fears, and angers that continually pass through our minds and bodies and that so often hold us captive without our even being aware of it. I believe that a crisis may help foster detachment by increasing the capacity—through regular meditation—to reconnect with our embodied selves. Such a practice may also diminish our fantasies about fully understanding or controlling everything that we experience.

Regular training in Buddhist mindfulness fosters such detachment, as does the practice of *apatheia* in the early Christian spiritual tradition. The Greek word *apatheia* is related to “apathy” but does not mean indifference or lack of interest. In fact, quite the opposite, for *apatheia* is best translated as “non-reactivity.” Related to this is the common but counter-intuitive insight that crises test our ability to be mindfully present and remain non-reactive and, for that very reason, constitute optimum opportunities to practice mindfulness and *apatheia*.

There are two aspects of my own recent personal journey that were most critical in pulling the varied pieces of my life together and contributing decisively to my own spiritual formation. The first was a renewed understanding of the traditional notion of purgation—understood not as divine punishment but as an invitation to use any crisis in which I find myself to shed emotional and spiritual baggage that burdens me, limits my flourishing, and keeps me from being open to the presence of the Holy Spirit in my life. This way of responding to crises has more and more begun to shape my behavior during difficult times.

The second aspect was discovering how critically important the regular cultivation of *hesychia* is for the practice of *apatheia*, of non-reactivity, as well as for achieving a measure of personal integration.⁷ The Greek word *hesychia*, meaning silence and quietude, was much beloved by the early Church. I have chosen to use it because it is a word rich in meaning, describing not just absence of sound and physical stillness, but inner quietude, equanimity and tranquility and, most important of all, openness to the Holy Spirit. The *hesychast* tradition, which began among

monastics in the deserts of Egypt and Syria during the third and fourth centuries C.E., is still an active spiritual practice that centers on the use of the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me," as a way of being still and knowing God.⁸

I was accustomed as a pastoral psychotherapist to think of the process of personal integration in psychological terms. I was surprised, therefore, to realize that neither psychological insight nor psychotherapy but spiritual formation provided the means for this to happen in my life. Although the choice of purgation and hesychia is personal, I know from others, who have entrusted me with their stories, that purgation and hesychia, understood in this way, can also play an integrative role in the lives of others. It is not possible to practice sitting in prayerful silence on a regular basis without becoming more aware of our embodied selves and of the incessant stream of thoughts and feelings that courses through our minds and bodies. "When I first began to practice meditation intensively," the Buddhist psychiatrist Mark Epstein writes, "I found that my sense of myself *in my body* was dramatically increased. This is the foundation of any successful meditation and the source of much of its power. As I also discovered, this can be as frustrating as it is rewarding because of the mind's inevitable tendency to pull itself away from the body. Mindfulness of the body is a lesson in how much time we spend in obsessive and repetitive thought."⁹

The practice of mindfulness or hesychia can make us aware, often uncomfortably so, of our lack of freedom from the incessant stimuli that bombard us, of our inability to know what is really going on in the here and now, of our predictable, conditioned responses, and of our inability ever to grasp the total context in which we find ourselves.

Many of us, for example, have experienced things we thought were positive not turning out well and, conversely, negative experiences having unexpected positive outcomes. This humility about correct analysis and forecast is a very important disposition in being able to weather crises. This is not to say that everything, no matter how bad, will ultimately turn out well. That is patently not true. But it is to say that we hardly ever know how things will turn out in the end.

Practicing mindfulness, Mark Epstein reminds us, increases our capacity for tolerating ambiguity or, as he puts it, quoting the pioneering psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, letting go and "unintegration" (not to be confused with disintegration). "We are poor indeed," Winnicott once wrote, "if

we are only sane.” “We must learn,” adds Epstein, “to relax the grip of the thinking mind that is always assessing its next victim.”⁴⁰ Pema Chödrön has written in a similar way about not knowing what is going to happen. “When we think that something is going to bring us pleasure, we don’t know what’s really going to happen. When we think something is going to give us misery, we don’t know...Life is like that. We don’t know anything. We call something bad; we call it good. But really we just don’t know.”⁴¹ Pema Chödrön’s comments resonate with my own experience. This is not to glorify suffering—for nothing much of worth can come out of suffering *per se*, most especially out of extreme suffering due to chronic trauma and abuse by whatever means that is inflicted. But it is to say that we should be careful not to read the inevitable negative feelings that result from any crisis we may find ourselves in as ultimate trustworthy arbiters of reality.

TRAUMA REACTIVATION

We all know from experience that our moods can shift abruptly and without warning. We can go from feeling perfectly all right one moment to feeling anxious and disturbed the next. Usually these shifts in the way we feel are not intense or long lasting. We may not even know what caused our mood to change but whatever happened, the episode passes. Shifts in moods can be likened to weather that passes through our minds and bodies.

Sometimes, however, whatever has been triggered in us is so powerful that we feel overwhelmed and sense ourselves taken over by a force beyond our control. It can feel like being hijacked against our will. This can happen when we are suddenly confronted by a natural or man-made disaster like an earthquake, tsunami, or a terrorist attack. It can happen when a routine medical test turns out to reveal a life threatening disease. It can happen when we think our work is going well and we are suddenly laid off or fired. It can happen when a sudden death rends the fabric of our lives. It can happen when we pass close by someone on the street who wears the same aftershave lotion as the man who sexually abused us. It can happen in the midst of a Sunday Adult Forum when a particular word used by the presenter triggers something so powerful in a Vietnam vet that he has to leave. The list is endless.

My own experience of being emotionally hijacked happened one sunny morning in July 1988. I received a mailing from my father in the Netherlands that included a magazine article about the last Japanese concentration camp that I was kept in during World War II in Indonesia. I had not thought of the name of that camp for years. The headline over a brief article my father had marked read: "Monument Jongenskampen [Boys Camps] Bangkong-Gedungjati 1944–45." The accompanying photograph was of a statue of an emaciated teenager, clad only in a loincloth and carrying a pickaxe and hoe. Most boys who were physically able were required to work in nearby fields. I later wrote about that moment in this way:¹²

My reaction was immediate and extraordinary. I felt as if I had been physically hit. It was as if the scab of some deeply hidden wound had been ripped off. I burst into tears and wept and wept as I kept looking at the picture and that article. I could not stop crying. I was vaguely aware that my eyes widened, as in fright, and that the sound I was making was not that of a then 54 year old man but that of a much younger person, a boy.

I sat at that kitchen table for a very long time, weeping and sobbing and staring at that awful name, and that poor boy who stood for me and for so many others whom I had known. I was flooded with feelings and images of that dreaded camp, of the suffering and despair, of the starvation, of the abuse, and of the feeling of helplessness. It amazed me how sharp and immediate these feelings were, as fresh as if they had happened yesterday, even though, on that morning, the events that occasioned them occurred more than forty three years earlier.¹³

This moment of a suddenly remembered, painful experience is a common one. The content of the story, of course, differs from person to person, but the dynamic is similar. Many of us have experienced the sudden influx of strong emotions when some forgotten or blocked past suffering is remembered and when our feelings finally link up with what we have known all along but in a disembodied or dissociated kind of way. We remembered the facts but the feelings suitable to the occasion were absent until the moment of reactivation.

What happened to me was the unexpected reactivation of a traumatic time in my life, a memory that was triggered by the sight of a photograph and a place name. It is not that I had forgotten this episode, but I had dealt with it the way we all deal with things that threaten to overwhelm us, namely by dissociating the memory from feelings appropriate to the oc-

casation. Dissociation can be a powerful survival mechanism. Clearly I had become skilled at dissociating feelings from painful experiences.

My experience that July morning in 1988 also revealed the lingering grief that routinely is exposed by a trauma reactivation: grief over loss of life, of youth, of family and friends, of innocence, of wasted years.¹⁴ I learned from that particular trauma reactivation to appreciate anew that the length of time that has elapsed between the event and the intensity of its reactivation is not a factor at all. Painful life experiences get encoded in our brains and bodies and can be reactivated with great intensity by the right kind of trigger decades later, even if we believe that we have dealt with them or have completely forgotten about them.¹⁵ It is never helpful, therefore, to say to someone who is struggling with such a reactivated memory, "This happened so long ago, you should have gotten over it by now." Some troubling sight or experience in the present, like the name and photograph of that last concentration camp I was in, can trigger the memory of a whole cluster of difficult times or experiences in the past.

On further reflection, several things about trauma reactivation stand out. First, whatever is activated has been either out of our awareness altogether or experienced up to the moment of reactivation as an undifferentiated bad feeling. Feeling badly can be like being carried along by a river that is fed by a number of tributaries—without our usually being aware of this happening. Second, whatever is triggered is not one particular thing, but several things, each one a different remembered experience, and a different feeling state. Third, there is no pattern or order in which these different remembered experiences are recalled. And finally, when a reactivated memory becomes dominant, no amount of reassuring thoughts or knowing better will help.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM NEUROSCIENCE

Discoveries in neuroscience support my growing conviction, based on my own experience as well as that of others, that there appears to be no "once and for all" working through or shedding of a past injury or trauma. It has been shown that the brain is not unitary but is inherently social and consists of interconnected parts that "can compute, remember, feel emotion, and act" without there having to be any conscious awareness or articulation in language of these neural processes.¹⁶

This goes against the still widespread belief that, if issues are worked through in psychotherapy or analysis, they remain resolved. The corollary to this view is that recurring problems following therapy point to an unsuccessful therapeutic process and/or indicate a need for more therapy. If the unpleasant news of neuroscience research is that it is not possible (due to the permanent encoding of patterns of behavior) to ever work something through to the point where painful experiences can no longer be reactivated, then the encouraging news is that it is possible to develop, always with the help of others, new ways of behaving, of coping, of relating, and of being in the world.

The help of caring others is critical for recovery. Recent research has shown that our minds are generated by the interaction between our individual neurophysiologies *and* interpersonal experiences. Mind is not a synonym for brain as is widely believed. Nor does only the brain generate the mind. Social experiences, that is to say interactions with others, create information that is programmed in the brain and this, in turn, shapes the development of the nervous system in children but can also affect the neurology of adults. Current thinking holds that the mind can best be understood as a patterned flow of energy and information not just within each person but between persons. The mind, in other words, is not limited by or originating from each single brain. Describing research on the relation between minds, brains, and relationships, Daniel Siegel emphasizes that more is involved in giving rise to the mind than the brain; the mind is always dependent on this ongoing interaction between our individual neurophysiology and our relationships to and with others.¹⁷

Experiences are encoded in the brain and become internalized programs that shape our behavior. To reiterate, the bad news is that we can never delete, so to speak, these internalized scenarios; the good news is we can learn new behaviors that are in turn encoded in our brains. The plasticity of the human brain makes such new behavior possible. In other words, the brain is not set in concrete but it can develop new connections among neurons and even generate new neurons and therefore new behavior. We are not stuck with who we have become or with the negative results of what has been done to us. We can develop new behaviors in interaction with others, learn what triggers them, what clusters and combinations they can form, recognize dysfunctional and harmful patterns, learn how to interrupt them, and establish more functional patterns.

Helping people fashion new ways of relating is a delicate process that must be done with care after trauma or trauma reactivation. Recent research has shown that intrusive questioning is not at all helpful. As a matter of fact, forcing people who are experiencing a crisis or have experienced a reactivation of past pain or trauma to talk not only makes things much worse but also actually runs the danger of re-traumatizing them. Traumatized persons need the space to feel whatever they are feeling without having to report on what they are experiencing. We now know that, when people feel they are in emotional or physical jeopardy, the emotion generating part of the brain (the amygdala or watchdog of the brain) goes into overdrive and the thinking part brain (prefrontal cortex) shuts down. At the same time, it is also important to encourage those who have been traumatized to reflect on their experience and, thereby, help diminish a sense of helplessness. One of the most damaging effects of being emotionally hijacked is to feel helpless and immobilized. Therefore fostering a sense of agency will help diminish the impact of such a negative experience.

It has been known for some time that during a time of crisis or trauma reactivation, a trigger can bypass the thinking part of the brain (neocortex) and go directly to the amygdala, the part of a more primitive part of the brain that encodes strong feelings and emotions.¹⁸ More recently it has been discovered that during an experience of trauma the hippocampus may be blocked. The hippocampus is that part of the brain that orders our experiences and tries to weave them into a meaningful narrative, tries to make sense of our experience. This would explain why we can feel so much at the mercy of a trauma reactivation that floods us with powerful feelings from the amygdala but have no corresponding ability to frame what has been reactivated in a way that increases rather than decreases our sense of agency, our ability to do something about what is happening, to name what is going on, and to have options.

This is why brief, repetitive prayers can be such a powerful way to keep the thinking part of the brain engaged, when flooded with emotion, and thereby achieve some distance from overwhelming affect. The neuropsychologist Patrick McNamara supports this hypothesis, "Religious practices like prayer and meditation form a way of developing and training cognitive functions that are crucial for personal autonomy, moral insight and intellectual creativity."¹⁹

HELPING PEOPLE THROUGH TRAUMA

In helping those who are going through reactivations of trauma, the quality of the relationship between helper and the one being helped is very important. The helper, no matter how well educated or highly trained or spiritually gifted, is not someone who knows or should know everything. The one being helped is never without insights and resources, even in the midst of crisis. Using these resources will keep the thinking part of the brain engaged and diminish powerlessness or helplessness. We need to treat all suffering people with respect and compassion and not as objects of our kindness or skill. This is especially important when working with those who have been traumatized.

There are two things that every helper must do in the midst of trauma. First of all, provide a secure and non-coercive environment, a “holding environment” as Winnicott phrased it so aptly many years ago, a setting in which those who have been traumatized not only feel safe but also really are protected from harm. The second thing is to give them complete control of what to share or talk about. The key to healing and recovery depends on knowing that they are safe and that they to have options. This way of helping traumatized persons requires the spiritual gift of hospitality, the ability to respect them as our guests, to ensure their safety, and to be present and listen without needing to control the process, push insights, or come to premature conclusions about what is going on and what should be done.

This is what the healing of memories is about. I have learned that traumatized people can teach us much about the way memories can be healed in a caring and safe environment. This healing is done, not by insight or imposition, but by the slow recovery of those wounded parts that we so easily bracket out of our awareness and by learning to tolerate the inevitable but ultimately healing waves of grief that are let loose by these reactivations. The following statements summarize what we have learned about trauma from neuroscience:

- Reason and insight are far less influential than they are thought to be
- We can never erase or completely work through a traumatic experience because it remains encoded in our neurophysiology
- There is no such thing as working something through once and for all
- We can learn to develop new patterns of behaving and reacting

- It is important to get a sense of the typical scenarios and clusters that are reactivated and give them names
- It is very important to get a sense of what triggers our trauma re-activations and what our typical physical reactions and ways of coping are
- In trying to figure out what is going on, we often have to reason backwards from the physical symptom (like dissociation)
- At any moment we can get caught up in multiple interactions involving past, present, future, mind, body, society, relations with others, groups, institutions, and a whole host of internalizations
- Neutrality or complete objectivity on the part of the helper is a fiction. Dealing with people will invariably trigger things like counter transference and internalized scenarios in us as well.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AND HEALING TRAUMA

Some time following the 1988 trauma reactivation, I became aware that this unsettling but liberating experience, in ways that I still do not fully understand, loosened the grip of my modernist self with its faith in philosophical materialism and emotivism—the two most dominant beliefs about the nature of reality in our Western society.²⁰ By materialism, I mean the belief that physical processes are the foundation of all of life, including consciousness and religious beliefs. What characterizes materialism most of all is its utter inability to accept the reality of the immaterial. Since matters of the spirit by definition deal with the immaterial, religious faith is marginalized as insignificant at best or written off as superstition at worst. People of faith want to believe, but their cultural conditioning makes it often difficult for them to realize that they are looking at the Christian faith through materialist glasses. It came as a revelation to me that I had been doing so.

The other dominant belief in our Western society is what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has called emotivism, that is to say the assumption that the subjective self is the arbiter of what is good and right and true.²¹ The prevailing psychological reductionism of this emotivist mindset is evident all around us in the increasing privatization of experience, the belief that the conscious, subjective self in its “thinking, observing, measuring and estimating,” in Thomas Merton’s words, “is absolutely primary...[and is] the one indubitable reality [from which] all truth starts.”²²

Emotivism can easily mislead us into believing that the way we feel at any given moment is truly what is going on.

In my work as therapist, priest, seminary professor, and spiritual director, I have had occasion to observe extraordinary emotivist conclusions. There is, for instance, the familiar rationale for ending a committed relationship: "I no longer feel any love or affection for you." Another one that I have heard repeatedly can be summarized as follows, "When I feel that God is close, then I know that God exists, but when I do not feel God's presence, then God does not exist." Emotivist feelings are typically what we know as conditioned responses. It is important for that reason to differentiate them from other kinds of feelings. Feelings can and do play a very important role in discerning the truth. If we think we are all right but our body tells us otherwise, we better pay attention. Feeling that there is something not right about an important relationship can rescue friendships or save marriages that have gone off track. The opposite is also true, namely that denying such diagnostic feelings can doom marriages and friendships. Although feelings play a significant role in our spiritual journeys, my adult theological lens has helped me to see in retrospect that God's presence in our lives does not depend on our feelings, awareness, or ability to reflect theologically.²³

Spiritual formation and spiritual healing come from practice. Hesychast practice requires setting aside regular times to sit in silence in contemplative prayer before God. For someone like me who was used to thinking about prayer in terms of talking to God either out loud or in the silence of my heart, this was a new way of understanding prayer. Actually it was a huge relief because I was never very good at extemporaneous prayer.

Sitting in silence is not an easy thing to do. Our culture considers it a waste of time, and, even worse, we immediately run into ourselves when we sit still. This practice does not require us to avoid or suppress feeling or thinking. This would actually be the worst thing we could do. Not only would it take enormous and futile effort to avoid thinking or feeling, but it would also focus us on our egos just as we are trying to de-center them. Experience with regular contemplative prayer can, slowly but surely, help to de-center the ego by naming truthfully what passes through us and then by letting it go. This is the heart of mindfulness training as well. Naming and letting go, naming and letting go, naming and letting go. This is a life-long project that involves changing well-established patterns of behavior.

“The key,” writes Pema Chödrön, “is changing our habits and, in particular, the habits of our mind.”²⁴ This is also true of contemplative prayer practice. It requires courage to keep at it, as well as persistence and humility to tolerate repeated failure. What is important is not being good at spiritual practice but remaining faithful to it.

HEALING SILENCE

Contrary to what I feared, experiences of sitting in prayerful silence did not obliterate my ego or impair my sense of self. On the contrary, they have imbued me with a more realistic sense of who I am both in terms of my abilities and my vulnerabilities. They have strengthened my identity. Neither have I experienced purgation and hesychia as a danger to fall into quietism, understood as a spiritual passivity that sits back in the hope that God will take care of things. On the contrary, it has made me more aware that the spiritual path is not a solitary journey and cannot be engaged in half-heartedly but requires our best efforts, the support of spiritual friends, and compassion and outreach to others. We are not asked to eradicate our egos but to de-center them. We need our ego as an administrator of our affairs. We do not need our ego to be the Sovereign of our life. We need our ego for planning. We do not need our ego for trying to control everything and everyone.

In my own life, I have become aware of the positive but gradual effects of regular spiritual practice. I find myself, for instance, less interested in successful outcomes than I used to be. What Anthony Bloom once said resonates with me. “What I aim at,” he wrote, “is to live within a situation and to be totally engrossed in it and yet free from involvement...The only question I keep asking myself in life is: what should I do at this particular moment? What should I say? All you can do is to be at every single moment as true as you can with all the power in your being—and then leave it to God to use you, even despite yourself.”²⁵

The practice of contemplative prayer has helped me to trust more in the reality of God whether that presence is affectively felt or not. It has given me greater freedom from the endemic forces of emotivism and materialism. Cultivating hesychia is helping me to move from abstraction to participation, from my head to my heart. This is slowly overcoming the disconnect that for so long has existed in me between theological abstraction and

the reality of God and daily life. Purgation and hesychia have also, again quite unexpectedly, contributed to the healing of memories. This has been a great blessing. Memories that have to do with traumatic experiences in my life, unresolved conflicts, missed opportunities, and many other burdens have kept my ego busy trying to resolve, overcome, explain, control, or minimize them, even though such efforts rarely succeed and usually only add to a sense of failure. The healing of memories is enormously liberating.

The benefits that come from regular contemplative practice, or sitting in prayerful silence, accrue to our ability to deal with difficult and upsetting experiences in ourselves and others, including trauma and trauma reactivation in ourselves or in those who have turned to us for help. The most telling benefit of such a practice is to give us greater freedom from being emotionally hijacked by experiences that trigger strong feelings in us.

By naming, as truthfully as we are capable of, over and over again, whatever thoughts and feelings arise in or pass through us, we slowly learn to differentiate between these thoughts and feelings and the rest of ourselves. We, thus, focus our awareness on the present moment in which we find ourselves, the moment in which God is present to us. We learn that we are not our thoughts no matter how strong, upsetting, or tempting they are and also that we are not our feelings, no matter how overwhelming, frightening, enraging, or seductive they may be.

Accurately and truthfully naming what is happening in us and around us does not make bad and hurtful things disappear but it shrinks and limits their power to take us over completely. This spiritual practice helps us grasp that we are more than our feelings and that we are more than our thoughts. But it also helps us see how easily we allow thoughts and feelings to hijack us.

In a world which is beset with suffering and trauma, in which we encounter in the course of our lives many traumatized women, children, and men, in which many of us have also been abused and have had to deal ourselves with the after effects of trauma, it is imperative that we know something about the nature of trauma and familiarize ourselves with the helpful insights of neuroscience. It is also critically important to ground our own spirituality in a regular spiritual practice that is undergirded by a cohesive theology. Such a spirituality can contribute to healing those who are dealing with trauma and its complicated and lasting aftermath.

NOTES

1. "The Case of Trauma and Recovery," Interview, Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley, September 21, 2000.
2. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 119.
3. For an elaboration of these concepts, see D. S. Martsof and J. R. Mickley, "The Concept of Spirituality in Nursing Theories: Differing World-views and Extent of Focus," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 27 (1998): 294–303.
4. Cheslyn Jones and others, ed., *The Study of Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xxvi. Quoted in the Wikipedia.
5. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1975); Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 1997); Mark Epstein, *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998); B. Alan Wallace, *Buddhism with an Attitude: The Tibetan Seven-Point Mind-Training* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2003).
6. Valerie Hotchkiss and Patrick Henry, ed., *Orthodoxy and Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 16.
7. For more on purgation and hesychia, see my article "Late Vocation: A Personal Reflection," *Anglican Catholic* XVI, summer (2004): 22–44.
8. cf. Psalm 46:10, Be still, and know that I am God! The imperative *Be still* in Hebrew (rapah/rfpa) does not mean "do not speak" but "relax your arms [body]." And *know* (yada'/yfda) means a total knowing, not just with the mind but also with the heart and body. For an excellent introduction to the Jesus Prayer, see Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford, U.K.: SLG Press, 1996).
9. Epstein, *Going to Pieces*, 106 (author's emphasis).
10. Epstein, *Going to Pieces*, 36, 44, 57.
11. Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart*, 10-12.
12. Material in this section has previously appeared in my article: A. J. van den Blink, "Trauma Reactivation in Pastoral Counseling: Implications for Theory and Practice," *American Journal of Pastoral Counseling* 1, no. 2 (1998).
13. Van den Blink, "Trauma Reactivation in Pastoral Counseling," 25–27.
14. Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), especially Part II.
15. cf. Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., "Clinical Implications of Neuroscience Research in PTSD," *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 1071 (2006): 277–293.
16. Michael Gazzaniga, *The Social Brain: Discovering the Networks of Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 86.

17. Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999).
18. Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 154–158 and 161–165. See also his *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Viking, 2002).
19. Quoted in Jacques Janssen, *Religie in Nederland: Kiezen of Delen?* (Tilburg, The Netherlands: KSGV, 2007), 118.
20. Material in this section has appeared previously in “Late Vocation: A Personal Reflection”, *The Anglican Catholic* XVI, summer (2004): 22–44.
21. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 19–22.
22. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions Press, 1968), 22.
23. On the difference between God’s essence, which we cannot experience, and God’s energies, which we can participate in, see John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, trans. George Lawrence (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 202–227. See also his *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, trans. Adele Fisk (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 81–126.
24. Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart*, 169.
25. Anthony Bloom (Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh), *Beginning to Pray* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1970), 14.