

Contemplation and Compassion: The Second Gaze by Richard Rohr, OFM - December 2005

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Contemplation happens to everyone. It happens in moments when we are open, undefended, and immediately present. ~ Dr. Gerald May

I am just like you. My immediate response to most situations is with reactions of attachment, defensiveness, judgment, control, and analysis. I am better at calculating than contemplating. Let's admit that we all start there. The false self seems to have the "first gaze" at almost everything.

On my better days, when I am "open, undefended, and immediately present," I can sometimes begin with a contemplative mind and heart. Often I can get there later and even end there, but it is usually a second gaze. The True Self seems to always be ridden and blinded by the defensive needs of the false self. It is an hour by hour battle, at least for me. I can see why all spiritual traditions insist on daily prayer, in fact, morning, midday, evening, and before we go to bed prayer too! Otherwise, I can assume that I am back in the cruise control of small and personal self-interest, the pitiable and fragile "richard" self.

The first gaze is seldom compassionate. It is too busy weighing and feeling itself: "How will this affect me?" or "How does my self image demand that I react to this?" or "How can I get back in control of this situation?" This leads us to an implosion, a self pre-occupation that cannot enter into communion with the other or the moment. In other words, we first feel *our* feelings before we can relate to the situation and emotion of the *other*. **Only after God has taught us how to live "undefended," can we immediately stand with and for the other, and for the moment.** It takes lots of practice. Maybe that is why many people even speak of their "spiritual practice"?

My practice is probably somewhat unique because of the nature of my life. I have no wife, family, or even constant community. My Franciscan tradition and superiors have allowed me in these later years to live alone, in a little "hermitage" behind the friary and parish, that I call East of Eden. I am able to protect long hours of silence and solitude each day (when I am home), which I fill with specific times of prayer, study, journaling and writing, spiritual reading, gardening, walking, and just gazing. It is a luxury that most of you do not have. (My 50% of time on the road is much harder to balance, and probably more like your life).

On a practical level, my at home day is two extremes: both very busy (visitors and calls, counselees, work at the CAC, mail, writing, and some work at Holy Family parish) yet on the opposite side, my life is very quiet and alone. I avoid most social gatherings, frankly because I know *my soul has other questions to ask and answer as I get older*. (Thank God, my Franciscan community has honored this need). Small talk and "busyness about many things" will not get me there. If I am going to continue to address groups, as if I have something to say, then I have to really know what I know, really believe what I believe, and my life has to be more experiential and intimate than mere repetition of formulas and doctrines. I am waiting, practicing, and asking for the second gaze.

I suppose this *protected interiority* was the historic meaning of cloister, vows of silence, silence in church, and guarded places and times inside of monasteries, where you were relieved of all the usual social pleasantries and obligations. Some had to be free to move beyond ego consciousness to deeper contact with the unconscious, the shadow self, the intimate journey of the soul, toward conscious union with God. Traditionally, one was never allowed to live as a

“hermit” until later in life, and only after you had paid your dues to community and concrete relationships. Only community and marriage force you to face, own, and exorcise your own demons. Otherwise, the loner is just a misanthrope or a sociopath, a person with poor social skills, or a person who desires to have total control of their day and time. This is not holiness. Avoiding people does not compute into love of God, being quiet and alone does not make you into a contemplative. Introversion and shyness are not the same as inner peace or communion. “Still waters run deep,” they say, but that water can be either very clear or quite toxic.

Your practice must somehow include the problem. Prayer is not the avoiding of distractions, but precisely how you deal with distractions. Contemplation is not the avoidance of the problem, but a daily merging with the problem, and finding its full resolution. What you quickly and humbly learn in contemplation, **is that how you do anything is probably how you do everything.** If you are brutal in your inner reaction to your own littleness and sinfulness, your social relationships and even your politics will probably be the same – brutal. One sees a woman overcome this split in an autobiography like St. Therese of Lisieux’s, *Story of A Soul*. This young contemplative nun is daily dealing with her irritations, judgments, and desire to run from her fellow sisters in the convent. She faces her own mixed motives and pettiness. She is constant in her concern for those working actively in the missions. But her goal is always compassion and communion. She suffers her powerlessness until she can finally break through to love. *She holds the tension within herself (the essence of contemplation) until she herself is the positive resolution of that tension.* Therese always gets to the second gaze.

It has taken me much of my life to begin to get to the second gaze. By nature I have a critical mind and a demanding heart, and I am impatient. These are both my gifts and my curses, as you might expect. Yet I cannot have one without the other, it seems. I cannot risk losing touch with either my angels or my demons. They are both good teachers. A life of solitude and silence allows them both, and invariably leads me to the second gaze. The gaze of compassion, looking out at life from the place of Divine Intimacy is really all I have, and all I have to give, even though I don’t always do it.

I named my little hermitage “East of Eden” for some very specific reasons, not however, because of John Steinbeck’s marvelous novel (and movie) of the same name. On a humorous level, it was because I moved here six years ago, 300 yards “east” of Holy Family Friary where I had previously lived. We had a fine community while I was there, consisting of three priests, two brothers, and many visitors who genuinely enjoyed one another—most of the time anyway! All my needs and desires were met in very good ways. It was a sort of “Eden.”

But I also picked the name because of its significance in the life of Cain, after he had killed his brother Abel. It was a place where God sent Cain, this bad boy, after he had failed and sinned, yet ironically with a loving and protective mark: “*So Yahweh put a mark on Cain so that no one would do him harm. He sent him to wander in the land of Nod, East of Eden*” (Genesis 4:16).

By my late 50’s I had had plenty of opportunities to see my own failures, shadow, and sin. The first gaze at myself was critical, negative, and demanding, not helpful at all, to me or to others. I am convinced that such guilt and shame are never from God. They are merely the protestations of the false self as it is shocked at its own poverty – the defenses of a little man who wants to be big man. God leads by compassion toward the soul, never by condemnation. If God would relate to us by severity and punitiveness, God would only be giving us permission to do the same (which is tragically, exactly what has happened!). God offers us, instead, the grace to “weep” over our sins more than ever perfectly overcome them, to humbly recognize our littleness rather than become big. It is the way of Cain, Francis, and Therese. It is a kind of weeping and a kind of wandering that keeps us both askew and awake.

So now my later life call is to “wander in the land of Nod,” enjoying God’s so often proven love and protection, and look back at my life, and everybody’s life, the One-And-Only-Life, marked happily and gratefully with the sign of Cain. Contemplation and compassion are finally coming together. This is my second gaze. It is well worth waiting for, because only the second gaze sees fully and truthfully. It sees itself, the other and even God with God’s own eyes, which are always eyes of compassion.

(Fourth in the Series on CAC Principles)