



ARE YOU A CONTEMPLATIVE (OR BECOMING ONE?)

By Rev. Bill Haley



CORACLE

For a long time, my simple definition of ‘contemplation’ has been, “**Being present to the presence of God,**” tweaked perhaps to, “**Being present to the loving presence of God.**” The second is a helpful reminder, but it is actually a redundancy. God’s presence is by definition loving. Being present to the presence of God is always being present to the loving presence of God, thank God! Carl McColman writes in his wonderful book, [Answering the Contemplative Call](#), “As a member of the Christian tradition, when I speak of contemplation, I refer to the Christian journey into the love of God.” (xiv)

This contemplation–being present to God–is something we can grow in through a variety of spiritual practices. Over time, we spend more of our days–first consciously and then more unconsciously–living present to the loving presence of God in all things and encountering God in more things.

Contemplation takes practice, and over time as we learn what contemplation is and practice it more, the practice forms us and even changes who we are. **Action becomes character. Doing becomes being. Practice becomes lifestyle. Understanding becomes orientation. Willful choice becomes instinct.** Doing contemplation turns into becoming and then recognizing that one has become a contemplative (even if imperfectly, which it will always be).

If we define contemplation as being present to the presence of God, how might we define what a contemplative is? Here’s my current best shot, an echo of many who are much wiser than me: “**A contemplative is a person seeking union with God.**” Imagine a beautiful fish in shallow water, holding peaceably in a quiet tide pool, turning and beginning to swim out to the broader, deeper ocean.

How do you know when you are a contemplative, a person seeking union with God? That’s a question perhaps best answered in retrospect, a recognition that it has already happened somewhere along the way, that what had previously been chosen acts of spiritual practice, discipline, and conscious reflection have become more instinctive and unconsciously operative.

Given this reality, perhaps it would be better to ask, “How do you know when you’re becoming a contemplative?” The following markers are a mix of the two questions. As you slowly read through them, savoring them, see which ones stand out to you, shimmer for you, or smell like an invitation. These are likely good places to lean into as you continue your own contemplative journey, your own pursuit of union with God. They are clues to point you beyond the tide pool into deeper water.

How do you know when you are a contemplative (or becoming one)?

- *When you know God is as close to you as your breath, and this is comforting*
- *When you begin to see God in every leaf*
- *When silence becomes your deepest way of praying*
- *When you find yourself increasingly needing and hungry for the Eucharist*
- *When your response to seeing the ocean is to sit and want to be still and breathe*
- *When your heart is increasingly broken by the suffering in the world and in people around you*
- *When you are deeply pained by your own failures to love*
- *When your own sin stings you both more and less*
- *When nature becomes increasingly sacramental*
- *When you find yourself more regularly, even desperately, needing to be alone with God*
- *When you have more compassion on people, especially those who hurt you*
- *When confession to God is a relief*
- *When Jesus becomes fascinating*
- *When breathing becomes a spiritual act*
- *When you desire only to love more*
- *When you become more attentive and faithful to mundane acts and tasks*
- *When random people behave badly to you, and your response is compassion because of their blindness and enslavement*
- *When getting up earlier is easier*
- *When you are kinder to animals, and grieved when you are not*
- *When tears well up more easily, for both sadness and beauty, for both pain and joy*
- *When your awe of Jesus' love increases and your sorrow over his suffering increases*
- *When you can carry more unresolved pain with hope*
- *When you want to read shorter Scripture passages more slowly*
- *When the Gospels become living to you*
- *When things you don't understand don't bother you as much, and you can more easily say, "I don't know"*

- *When evil done in the name of God and especially Christ bothers you more deeply*
- *When the desire for material things diminishes and possessions become more burdensome*
- *When the four elements—Earth, Air, Water, and Fire—speak more deeply to you*
- *When you increasingly hunger and thirst for justice; when injustice hurts more*
- *When forgiveness becomes easier and comes more quickly*
- *When it becomes increasingly easier to see the unseeable*
- *When simple, basic human tasks more often become sacred and places of devotion and encounter*
- *When the Trinity becomes an invitation*
- *When Mary becomes more curious to you*
- *When you are more freely able to give other people freedom to be who they are and find their own path*
- *When death becomes something to look forward to, and every moment of life until that point becomes something to steward well*
- *When the saints and mystics of the Church have more to say to you, and mystics of other faiths have something to say*
- *When words increasingly fail*
- *When your prayers for other people become shorter, truer, and less controlling, and your prayers for yourself become more vulnerable and actually honest*
- *When the old prayers, other’s prayers said again and again across time, become more meaningful, carry more weight, and are enough*
- *When you desperately want people to know how beautiful Jesus is and how awesome God is and how present the Spirit is*
- *When you see things in familiar Scripture passages that you’ve never seen before, and it brings a whole new light*
- *When you are increasingly comfortable with who you are and less bothered by who you are not*
- *When it matters less what happens to you as long as it furthers God’s will*

If this description of ways of being and seeing stirs something in you, God is likely inviting you deeper into God’s self—a deeper knowledge and experience of God’s love for you and for all things.


For today, just thank God for the gift of some language to put on the stirrings of your heart, some words that might help put words to your desires. **This day, enjoy living in the knowledge that God is living with you, aware of you, loving you, and at least whispering if not singing to you, “Come further.”**

If you find yourself lit up a bit more or a lot more with longing for God today, Rejoice and be glad!! That means God is acting on you. From Carl McColman again: “Now, here’s the kicker. The longing we sense for God is a gift given to us by God, out of God’s longing for us.” Others make the same point.

In other words, if today we’re finding ourselves wanting more of God, it’s because God is active in our hearts and putting that desire there, SO THAT we can seek and find him however God chooses to show up to us. It means we’re being acted on by the God who is both real and really loves us, and who is paying specific attention to us. This is beautiful, and encouraging. To quote John, “We love him because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4.19). That’s not just a one-time deal, every time we’re drawn to God it means that God is drawing us!

I join St. Paul in praying that God would keep drawing us further out into the depths of Christ’s love, deeper into union and God’s own fullness in our own lives and lived experience, further out into that boundless sea...*“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”* (Eph. 3.18-19)

On the Journey,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Erin Halz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter 'z'.

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