

Text from the Tradition: The Way of the Heart, Henri Nouwen (text drawn from pp. 68, 71, 74,79-81, 86)

The Role of the Heart in Prayer

“Many of us think about prayer as primarily an activity of the mind that involves above all else our intellectual capacities. This prejudice reduces prayer to speaking with God or thinking about God. For many of us, prayer means nothing more than speaking with God. And since it usually seems to be a quite one-sided affair, prayer simply means talking to God. This idea is enough to create great frustrations: If I present a problem, I expect a solution; if I formulate a question, I expect an answer; if I ask for guidance, I expect a response. And when it seems, increasingly, that I am talking in the dark, is it not so strange that I soon begin to expect that my dialogue with God is in fact a monologue? The crisis of our prayer life is that our mind may be filled with ideas of God while our heart is far from [God]. Real prayer comes from the heart.”

“Prayer is standing in the presence of God with the mind in the heart; that is, at that point of our being where there are no divisions or distinctions and where we are totally one. There God’s Spirit dwells and there the great encounter takes place. There heart speaks to heart, because there we stand before the face of the Lord, all-seeing, within us.

In our milieu the word heart has become a soft word. It refers to the seat of the sentimental life. But the word heart in the Jewish-Christian tradition refers to the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional, and moral energies. From the heart arise unknowable impulses as well as conscious feelings, moods, and wishes. The heart, too, has its reasons, and is the center of perception and understanding. The heart is the seat of the will: it makes plans and comes to good decisions. Thus, the heart is the central and unifying organ of our personal life. The prayer of the heart is a prayer that directs itself to God from the center of the person and thus affects the whole of our humanness.”

“The prayer of the heart is nurtured by short, simple prayers. The prayer of the heart is unceasing. The prayer of the heart is all-inclusive. The quiet repetition of a single word can help us descend with the mind into the heart. This simple prayer, when we are faithful to it and practice it at regular times, slowly leads us to an experience of rest and opens us to God’s active presence. Moreover, we can take this prayer with us into a very busy day.”

“When we learn to descend with our mind into our heart, then all those who have become part of our lives are led into the healing presence of God and touched by [God] in the center of our being. We are speaking here about a mystery for which words are inadequate. It is the mystery that the heart, which is at the center of our being, is transformed by God into [God’s] own heart, a heart large enough to embrace the entire universe. Through prayer we can carry in our heart all human pain and sorrow, all conflicts and agonies, all torture and war, all hunger, loneliness, and misery, not because of some great psychological or emotional capacity, but because God’s heart has become one with ours.”

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: The Way of the Heart, Henri Nouwen by Christine Luna Munger

When you pray or meditate, take note of where the energy of your attention is: does it float out somewhere above or in front of the center of your head? Does it rest near the core of your body, somewhere near your chest? Does it sit elsewhere in your physical body? Wherever your attention lies, is likely where your prayer lies.

Along with Nouwen, I suspect that most of us, especially if we have not learned to direct our attention through use of a sacred phrase or object, find that our attention's regular landing point is disproportionately located near our mind. While we would not benefit from dis-regarding the mind during our prayer, we also do not benefit from its over-functioning at the expense of our other natural human capacities.

A distinct disadvantage of the over-functioning mind in our prayer-life becomes clear when we recognize that the mind's abilities to clarify, to sort, to efficiently see, produces within us a sense of bias toward "usefulness." If the efficient and productive mind is in charge of our attention and determines the value of our activity, then surely the leisurely restfulness of the prayer of the heart would be discounted as wasteful or not useful.

A second distinct disadvantage of the sorting and categorizing qualities of the mind, if left un-checked, is that we are prone to compartmentalize certain activities from others and draw exaggerated boundaries between events and people. For example, the compartmentalized mind might suggest that God is present when I formally engage the activity of prayer, but not during the rest of the activities of the day. If left un-checked, the exaggerated boundary-making quality of the mind potentially extinguishes the insight of the heart, which is to perceive the presence of the Holy in all things, everywhere, all of the time. The heart permits the person of prayer to engage in a sense of sacramentality, to perceive the Truth of Presence throughout all of creation.

John Phillip Newell uses the metaphor of the changing of light from day to night to suggest the value of both the mind and the heart in our prayer. Whereas the bright clarity of the light of day, the source of which is the sun might be like the knowing of the mind; the soft ambiguity of the light of night, the source of which is the moon, might be like the knowing of the heart. Together, both lights form the eternal dance of every new day. Similarly, when the mind meets the heart in descent, the human being also participates in an eternal dance of prayer.

Questions for Reflection: The Way of the Heart, Henri Nouwen

- When you pray or meditate, take note of where the energy of your attention is: does it float out somewhere above or in front of the center of your head? Does it rest near the core of your body, somewhere near your chest? Does it sit elsewhere in your physical body?
- In what ways do you notice your formal prayer periods spilling over into your other daily activities?