

Text from the Tradition: Meditations by Thomas Moore (text drawn from pp. 76, 1, 68, 4, 5)

Emptiness and Silence in Contemplation

Monks are called to the contemplative life. The word means to cut out a space for divination. The monk creates an inner temple of space in mind, imagination, and heart where he can observe the signs of divine Providence. The work of the spiritual life includes the building of these inner temples and the creation of *temenos*- space set apart for sacred use. As this work progresses, everything acquires its *temenos*. As Emerson said, everything becomes a sign. Contemplation, the primary work of the monk, achieves the necessary emptiness in everything, every moment, and every event. These empty spaces, simply marked out as sacred, invite the soul to participate and provide places for its dwelling.

Early Christian monks went out to live in the desert in order to find emptiness. Modern life is becoming so full that we need our own ways of going to the desert to be relieved of our plenty. Our heads are crammed with information, our lives busy with activities, our cities stuffed with automobiles, our imaginations bloated on pictures and images, our jobs burdened with endless new skills, our homes cluttered with gadgets and conveniences. We honor productivity to such an extent that the unproductive person or day seem a failure. Monks are experts at doing nothing and tending the culture of that emptiness.

Silence is not the absence of sound. That would be to imagine it negatively. Silence is a toning down of inner and outer static, noise that occupies not only the ears but also the attention. Silence allows many sounds to reach awareness that otherwise would go unheard- the sounds of birds, water, wind, trees, frogs, insects, and chipmunks, as well as conscience, daydreams, intuitions, inhibitions, and wishes. One cultivates silence not by forcing the ears not to hear, but by turning up the volume on the music of the world and the soul.

Withdrawal from the world is something we can, and perhaps should, do everyday...Just as a loaf of bread needs air in order to rise, everything we do needs an empty place in its interior. I especially enjoy such ordinary retreats from the active life as shaving, showering, reading, doing nothing, walking, listening to the radio, driving in a car. All of these activities can turn one's attention inward toward contemplation...Anything is material for retreat-cleaning out a closet, giving away some books, taking a walk around the block, clearing your desk, turning off the television set, saying no to an invitation to do *anything*. At the sight of nothing, the soul rejoices.

When I lived in a monastery retreat from the world wasn't sufficient. One day a month and one week each year we "went" on retreat. We didn't leave the monastery, but we went away from it. Going away- literally, figuratively-is the essence of retreat. I remember a considerable amount of walking during retreat. There is still beauty in the image my memory conjures up of brothers taking solitary walks slowly through the lush gardens or lazily down the dusty roads. This was walking for the soul-no calculating of heartbeats, no effort to get anywhere, no concern for speed, no worry about going around in circles. Simply getting away from the linear life, going away from mood or reflection, walking away from the action, or shutting down business as usual: this is all the start of retreat in the core of the monastics-only a walk away.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

Thomas Moore's personal life experience provides an interesting perspective on a tension that many people who are committed to the spiritual life often feel—the sense of feeling torn between “sacred” and “secular” life. Moore lived for twelve years as a monk, but also lived as a family man and husband. In his writings, he consistently suggests that the monastic life explicitly points to the sacred which is to be found in the midst of the secular. He does not divvy up the sacred and the secular, the monastic and family life; rather, he suggests that the monastic vocation simply points explicitly to something that we should all be aware of—the holy and sacred in the midst of the ordinary and profane.

Moore is perhaps most famous for his text, “Care of the Soul,” in which he sketches out the differences between “spirit” and “soul,” which serves as another instructive tension. Whereas spirit is transcendent and universal, the soul is grounded and particular. Our spirits invite us into “the more” and our souls invite us into “the now.” Moore suggests that both in care of the soul and in spirituality, both positive and negative influences work to transform spirit and soul. Our spirits and our souls benefit from light and darkness.

Recently, someone shared with me that her friend said, with a radiant and joyful countenance, “I love this virus” (in reference to the coronavirus). When pressed, the commenting woman pointed to all of the good that has come out of humankind in response to the tragedy of the pandemic. In the midst of chaos, everything gets shaken up, and perhaps when the pieces come together again, we find evidence of a better arrangement of life. In the midst of daily life, everything is holy, and perhaps when we are empty enough to “see” things as they are, we find evidence of abundance and deep communion with one another.

Moore reminds us that the work of contemplation begs for integrity, for seeing things as they really are, a unified whole. We do not have to go to special places or perform exotic acts to engage in soul work. The work of contemplation invites us to behave as if wholeness, and not separation, were the defining quality of reality. When we presume wholeness, both the monk's processions and the young mother's daily walks in nature count as soul work. Both the time on the sitting pillow and the time on the sleeping pillow contribute to wellness and holiness. Both the argument and the reconciliation process make the relationship stronger. The quality of vastness found in emptiness and the quality of simplicity found in silence allow us to live into wholeness through the both and the “and” of dark and light, holy and ordinary, monk and mom. Soul work is whole work. May each of us experience ourselves as necessary fragments within the Whole of Life Abundant.

Questions for Reflection:

- Where and when do you find “signs” of the holy in ordinary life?
- In what ways, if any, do your intentional spiritual practices foster emptiness?
- In the midst of daily life, when and where do you stumble across emptiness or make room for silence?