

Text from the Tradition: Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer by Brother David Steindl-Rast

Contemplation and Order (text drawn from pp. 61-68)

It often helps to follow the linguistic roots of a word if we want to understand more deeply what it means. Scholars tell us that, in [ancient times, the little symbol “temp”] might have meant something like making a notch...a simple device for starting to count and to measure. The word “temple” comes from the same root. It is the word most directly related to contemplation. Originally, the Latin word for temple *templum* did not mean an architectural structure, but stayed closer to the sense of measure. It meant a measured area...not on the ground but in the Sky. Only later did *templum* come to mean a sacred precinct on the ground...It was *templum* in the sense of a section of the Sky, however, which the Roman priests, the augers, contemplated. That means that they fixed their gaze on it with sustained attention...in classical Rome, no important public decision was made unless the proposed plan agreed with what the auger saw. This practice expresses a frame of mind older than logical reasoning, an archetypal syndrome deeply ingrained in our human psyche...

“Above” and “below” have a significance for us humans which analytical thought cannot fathom...This must have something to do with the fact that we grow up, not down like carrots. Not even the clumsiest of us will fall up when we fall down. The consistency with which “above” and “below” polarize all human thought and language is surprising enough. That up vs. down implies everywhere the same value judgement is even more astounding...The common sense that makes us understand relationships like those between high, deep and low must be older than language. And it seems to be common to all human beings. Let us for a moment focus on the fact that the way in which we experience “high” and “low” puts a basic order into our human view of the world. Common sense tells us that order is to be valued higher than disorder, that there are degrees of order, and that we are able to rise to a higher level of order. This is the point at which contemplation comes in. To contemplate means raising our eyes to a higher order that challenges us to measure up...to measure human life by a higher order and so to transform and perfect action through vision. Only the heart is high and deep enough to hold this vision.

[Contemplation] stands behind the whole theology of the temple, connecting Moses, the great contemplative, with Solomon's temple and with the temple that divine Wisdom builds; with Jesus Christ, in whom both wisdom and the temple are seen personified; and with *his* body, the new humankind, temple of the Holy Spirit...Even the law must be understood as a kind of plan according to which the people are to be built up into a temple of the living God. They become living stones rising to measure up to the vision of a divine order that must in the end shatter all measure. Only by sustaining the tension between the ideal and its realization, between vision and action, may we hope to build the temple. And only by building the temple does contemplation prove that it is genuine. The little prefix “con-” should remind us that merely gazing at the vision is not contemplation at all. Contemplation joins vision in action. It puts the vision into action. Action without vision is action running in circles, mere activism. Vision without action is barren vision. The little “con” which puts vision and action together is what makes contemplation demanding, and therefore, so difficult.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

Often, when I ask folks what comes to them as they consider the word “contemplation,” images of monks chanting, posers posturing, and super-prayers praying emerge. Unfortunately, as Brother David also laments, many of us assume that contemplation is something specially reserved for the elite contemplatives, and not for us more ordinary folk. Much effort must be expended in just simply announcing the good news that all human beings are “built for contemplation” (as Martin Laird has written), and therefore, we are all invited to the feast.

At the same time that contemplation is universally accessible to human beings, Brother David acknowledges that it is difficult, hard work to stay awake, to consistently join our vision with our action. As Brother David notes, our lives are marked by polarization; division and a sense of two-ness constantly threaten to fragment our hearts, our minds, our senses, and our being. Those among us who regularly practice meditation and prayer, who “gaze at the sky” in wonder and eagerness for a sense of order and guidance, contribute to the hard work of building up the temple. We might claim that each intentional prayer period, each session of mediation on the pillow or the pavement, lays a brick on the foundation, effectively symbolizing our faith and hope that the higher order of Love will prevail over division and fragmentation. Healing is a higher order than brokenness; wholeness dissolves division.

My friends and family sometimes point out that my head is often in the clouds. I lose track of details and trip over logistics. Truly! It is hard work to hold vision and action together. Whether our inclination is toward the ground or the sky, may each of us offer our contributions towards vision and action with an intention and power that palpably produces living temples of contemplation in our world.

Questions for Reflection:

- What catches your attention from the reading? In your mind, heart, and senses?
- What is your sense of yourself—inclined toward the sky or the ground, vision or action? How do you integrate the other pole into your way of being in the world?
- The image of human beings as temples strongly suggests mutuality with the Holy One. In what ways might you honor the role of participation and co-creation in yourself and in others?