

WOMEN AND CONTEMPLATION

By MARY SHARON RILEY

I THINK I FORGOT HOW TO PRAY.' In these words and others like them women come to their spiritual directors to talk about the same phenomenon. Perhaps men say the same thing but it is women who say it to me. And in truth, I have said the same thing.

Finding their inability to pray distressing, they wonder what happened. They speak with sadness and sometimes with fear. The 'not-knowing-how-to-pray-any-more experience' brings grief with it. It mystifies them. 'What happened?' 'What am I doing wrong?', they ask.

Women of prayer who say, 'I do not know how to pray any more', take their spiritual lives seriously. For months, sometimes, and more often for years, they have risen early, stayed up late, dropped activities, found less time-consuming ways of doing things, all in order to pray. They make time, carving it out of busy lives. Habitually using the disciplines serving prayer, they take a moment or two to quiet themselves as they move into prayer, find prayer places, do their best to be about what they are about. They pray, reflect on their experience of prayer and, perhaps, write about it in 'prayer journals'. Though not always filled with high consolation, they learn to love their prayer time. To one another, to women with whom they can be self-revealing, they tell stories reflecting the concrete differences in their lives and relationships which arise because they take fifteen, thirty, even forty-five minutes or an hour, just to pray. Ruefully they admit that their family and friends notice differences in them when they 'are not praying'.

Formed by and through the Ignatian Exercises and/or other spiritualities such as Benedictine or Franciscan, these women pray the Gospels over and over, imaging the scene, seeing the people in it, hearing what they say, noticing what they do, speaking with the Lord about all they experience. These women live as 'one there' in the gospel passage they pray. Sometimes they are there as one of the persons in a story. At other times they are themselves with those the evangelist named. Because they have a place to sit or stand and a voice with which to speak they know they 'are in the scene'. They talk about their lives, feelings and concerns and beg for what is needed for themselves and for those they love.

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They make time to pray because in the prayer experience they meet Jesus Christ and the God who sent him. Being with him has become important, even vital to their well-being. Speaking their minds and hearts, talking about their lives in the give and take which is the stuff of real communication keeps them alive.

Loved, liked, considered worth spending time with by Jesus Christ, these women change. Nothing in their lives, neither their relationships to self, world and others nor their activities, work or role, remains unaffected. They live with a new, more realistic sense of themselves, see others differently and begin to recognize and relate to all people as sisters and brothers. As they pray their world widens. They awaken to new consciousness of responsibility to these brothers and sisters and struggle to find ways of realizing this responsibility. Aware of and pained by their sinfulness, they tolerate destructive sorts of shame less easily. With more realism they learn to love themselves. They admit that God's loving them is divine activity radiating God's wisdom and good sense.

Even as prayer nourishes them and their relationship with Jesus Christ beyond anything yet imagined, so it nourishes everything forming part of their lives. Knowing Jesus Christ and the God who sent him, loving Jesus Christ and incarnating this love in service – these acquire their own importance. The relationship is central to and for their lives.

Our tradition describes the prayer these women enjoy as discursive, and proper to beginners in the spiritual life. These women do not worry about names for prayer. Growing in the spiritual life, they wonder: 'How am I doing?' When and if they know one or other description of the spiritual life in terms of stages, they question: 'Where am I?' No one immunized them against the infecting temptation to measure themselves and to identify their proper stage. Belonging in a more developed stage lends them a certain sense of status, they think. Making progress seems to do one of two things: it gives or it proves their worth as persons.

Movement from relishing prayer to 'not knowing how to pray any more' happens suddenly for some, more gradually, even imperceptibly, for others. Fear, grief and sadness come in its wake. With more or less dramatic levels of frustration, impatience and restlessness, they find the Gospels and indeed the whole of the Scriptures at best dry or empty and at times dull. These women remember that they used to feel connected to Jesus Christ. Nothing but faith and remembrance connect them now. It is as if they cannot remember how to feel connected. With

disciplined fidelity they continue to go to their appointed prayer places, prepare their prayer as they learned to do, recall and believe they sit in God's presence, open the Scriptures and begin to feel something akin to so-called boredom. 'I don't get anything out of my prayer', they complain. However much effort they make, they cannot make prayer work. They find nothing in it. They feel 'nothing', they say.

For some of these women only their prayer seems to fall apart or go flat. 'Everything else in my life is working well. My life has never been better', they report. For others life does not move forward so smoothly. Some suspect that the external events, the difficulties causing life's felt roughness, explain the trouble they have with prayer. Whatever the differences in their circumstances and experience, they share a sense that they no longer know how to pray and that they have lost some control in their lives.

Imagine such a woman saying to her director, 'Help! I think I forgot how to pray'. What is the director to do? What help can the director give? More accurately, how can the director serve this woman so that she can receive all that her God wants to give her, indeed, is actively giving her?

With many of her sisters she has read the mystics, particularly the women mystics. She knows or at least knows about the Ignatian distinction between persons of the First Week and persons of the Second, the Dark Night described so poetically by John of the Cross, Teresa's *Interior castle* and the mansions at each stage of the journey. In attempting to talk about what is happening to her, she may try to use what she knows. 'Maybe I'm having a Dark Night experience or I'm in the Dark Night.' 'Maybe this is Second Week Consolation . . . or Desolation.' 'Maybe what is happening is . . .' this, that, or the next thing. 'Maybe I am . . .' here or there or . . .

What seducers these 'maybes' can be. They promise so much to the woman left with 'nothing' in her prayer. After all, knowledge is power. Explanations like these promise insight, understanding, resources enabling change so that prayer 'works' again. They guarantee satisfaction. Few things satisfy more than knowing.

'Maybe' statements like those quoted hold an implicit question: 'Am I?' They contain an implicit and sometimes an explicit request: 'Tell me'. Assuming the director *can* answer the question, should she or he answer? Why? Why not? How are directors to decide?

In order to answer these questions others questions must be asked. What will answers give the woman? How will they work for her? No one likes unanswered questions. Waiting for answers requires patience,

hence the temptation to grasp for answers, any answers appearing to fit. How much ambiguity can she live with while waiting? Will answers keep her close to her own experience, and not just close to it but in it? Will they move her farther from it, perhaps even out of it? Will answers help the woman recognize and receive the invitation extended to her?

Who or what invites her? To what does it invite? Herein lies the paradox, one both directee and director must entertain. 'Nothing', or more accurately the experience she rightly, if not quite accurately, names as 'Nothing', invites her. God invites through her experience. Will giving her the answer help her freely accept the one given by 'Nothing'? Will she hear God speak through it? Will answers help her continue to become the woman she is being given to become? Will they help her move into fuller, deeper union with her God in and through Jesus Christ? In sum, will answers serve her relationship with Christ? Will they help her grow?

Whatever the reasons for this experience, God speaks, invites in and through it, not just through reasons. When reasons relieve the woman's frustration in ways that help her live her experience, they serve the growth process. If, however, they function primarily to satisfy an apparent personal need for the control that knowing might give, answers take the woman out of her experience or render her less present to it. She came to the director asking for help to move out of or beyond the present cul-de-sac in which she finds herself. When they distance her from her experience, reasons impede growth, since she can move only from where she actually is.

Women are speaking about something they are certain is true when they say that they do not feel anything. With help to explore 'how this is' for them, they open their minds and themselves, discovering myriad overlapping feelings. Frustration, restlessness, loneliness, impatience and loss all find a home place within them.

If the woman who forgot how to pray is supported by a director who listens to all that she says, who conveys respect and believes in her, who sees and honours her as a woman faithful to prayer, life and God, then she can risk experiencing her feelings. The director's trust in God and his or her conviction that God invites to greater intimacy provides a context, an horizon against which to examine, sift and test the mettle of her feelings. In the director's stance, 'I remain unafraid of your pain and will not be deterred simply by your personal limitations and failings', the woman finds encouragement to listen to the message of her feelings and to the self-talk going on in her. She can hear her frustration

say: 'I could do it (pray). Now I can't. I can't remember. Why is this happening? What am I doing wrong? I follow the directions but prayer doesn't work any more.' She learns to listen to her restlessness: 'Prayer does not give me anything. I do not know what to do. Nothing I was taught about prayer works any more.' She finds herself able to let her loneliness ask, 'Where is Jesus Christ? Does God still care? Now when I pray I feel like I'm the only one there and prayer time will never end.' Her impatience can shout, 'Prayer used to make life easier. I appreciated my family, friends, life *and myself* more. Now I see only my failure in prayer and life. I see my compromises, the way I've agreed to buy peace or assure acceptance or be good. I'm sick and tired of winning approval, managing life's demands so that I can do the few things I want to do as if I had to earn permission to live, even to have my own life.'

Listening to these or similar complaints she can begin to recognize her own voice speaking them. Turning to all of her experience, not just her sense that she has gone flat and nothing is happening interiorly, she becomes better able to entertain two possibilities. Her feelings exist. However, although real, they do not define reality. If she acknowledges all her feelings, attends to them and learns what they may effect in her if given their head, she may discover other, more life-giving ways to move. She has choice about her life, her reality.

Frustration, restlessness, impatience, loneliness and the pain itself cover far more than feeling. Not only did the woman seeking direction lose prayer. She lost the markers, the signs announcing her relationship with Christ. In experiencing loss of the wonderful communication she enjoyed in her prayerful contemplation of Jesus Christ, she realizes that she feels as if she has lost him. She feels that she lost her love, her Lord, her God. No greater loss can be imagined. It comes with an aching awareness of loneliness, an emptiness permeating her and her life, draining both of relish. Even when faith reminds her that she has lost only her sense of Christ's presence, she misses him. She misses the God who sent him. She grieves. In losing him she loses dimensions of her sense of self, that self she knew as Christ's beloved. Left feeling strangely disorientated and displaced, she floats and flounders as one cut loose from her anchor.

Loss hurts. Its pain draws attention to itself. It wants to draw attention beyond itself to that which occasions the pain. Too often, however, suffering people get stuck in suffering because they suffer. Staying stuck amplifies the negative messages babbling within. Inside these women the messages shout, 'Pain keeps all the power. It overwhelms. It destroys.' Staying stuck threatens: 'I ravage people. I will ravage you.'

Women need to distinguish what pain can and cannot do in order that they may receive its gift. True, pain can kill. Nevertheless, however ghastly, awful, strong it may be, it does not hold all the power. It does not determine women nor singlehandedly govern their fate and future. It does not define women. It need not overwhelm. Pain cannot destroy people unless allowed to do so. Forcefully commanding attention to its painful self, suffering wants to point beyond itself to whatever injury, sickness, lack or trouble issues in pain. In order to move, the woman must relate to her pain. So too her director. If the director encourages the woman by him- or herself approaching the pain, entering into it with her, but without making it the director's own, he or she will allow the directee to claim her power, i.e. the power to choose how she will respond and what she will do about the trouble causing her pain.

Paradoxically, recognizing her grief begins to transform her inner emptiness, freeing her to move toward accepting God's invitation to come closer. Mourning comforts, blessing her with budding hope. 'All is not lost.' Hope and grief, grief and hope admixed free her to bring three needs to consciousness. She no longer has to deny the sadness weeping within her; she needs to mourn. Her experience wants to purify her, thus removing impurities in her relationship with Jesus Christ, herself, others and creation; she needs to co-operate with the process of purification. She received an invitation, 'Come to me'; she needs to accept it, living her way into it with all its implications. The director helps her attend to these needs, addressing them as best she can, letting grace do the rest.

She needs to mourn. When those she loved died, when her marriage was dissolved, when she lost home or job or friend, she did not need to look for causes to explain and justify her wrenching sadness. The cause was all too evident. In such grieving she learned that she knew a double loss. She lost someone or something *and* the part or whole of herself she knew in relationship to the person or thing lost. So too in this experience. While faith knows that Jesus Christ did not abandon her, nonetheless she feels desolate at his felt absence. Because her 'missing feelings' sound in her with the ring of truth, calling her to her own longing for God, to admit these feelings helps her to move. It gives her something to do in prayer. She can 'sit *shiva*' [mourn] for the relationships that she knew between Christ and herself precisely in order to let them go, to give them as she knew them back to God. She can long, speak her longing and let her longing speak. In grieving and longing she may suffer more; however, she will suffer differently. She will fight her own suffering less because it seems so fitting. What could be more

appropriate than this pain of loss? Knowing it as appropriate quiets her restlessness, dissipates her frustration and anger, giving her strength to exercise and be exercised in patience.

She needs to co-operate with the process of purification. The vantage points from which she views, the ways she sees, the eyes with which she sees, all are being purified. Her prayer is being purified. She is being purified in and through prayer.

Involved women live full, busy lives. They want a rule of thumb that will eradicate the pressure so much busyness creates. Wrestling with the conflict between being and doing, they seek a lasting solution to reduce their polar pull. In the past they sought and found ways outside themselves to balance activity and contemplation. These tools, including prayer itself, helped. As once she learned to balance physically out of a new centre, now the woman for whom the old ways and rules do not work must find a new balance point within herself. Formerly she applied a rule or followed a suggestion because 'they' said it bring make order in her life and self. Now she measures available options by weighing their coherence on the scale of her personal values. She may use the same rules or guidelines but she does so because she recognizes that they fit the demands of her life. Though her obligations and activities do not lessen, she lives more interiorly. From this interior vantage point she can better recognize that her prayer is changing and that she is changing because she prays.

Many women believe there is only one right way to pray. For their prayer to be good prayer they must 'do it right'. They think that quietening themselves for the personal meeting with God, which they call prayer, means ridding themselves of negative feelings. Pushing such feelings away to the edges of awareness they believe makes space for prayer, therefore, allowing the women to talk to God about these negative feelings and the events occasioning them. This notion of prayer is challenged and sorely tested by the 'Nothing – I forgot how to pray' experience. No matter how hard they push, the feelings will not go to the sidelines, let alone right away.

The woman trying to pray has never so needed Christ and real conversation with him. Never has prayer looked more impossible because messy feelings fill the inner prayer field. Letting the need with all its longing intensify until, almost of its own volition, it cries to God for God and for Jesus Christ – this experience scours out self-serving attempts to 'do prayer right'. God's grace gives her the wherewithal to be the woman she is given to be. Her need for Christ wants to speak itself, crying to Christ for whom it longs. Christ, not good prayer, matters. Her neediness ceases to be a negative to-be-expunged feeling. Her

need prays. She learns that all feeling can serve prayer, even be prayer. Not only can she pray about all her feelings, positive and negative, but she can stand in them and pray out of them. Her freedom grows with this learning. Even as she has more awareness of her feelings, she has less need to deny them because she relates to them differently. They live within her, trying to move her toward or away from something. Having them but no longer identified with them, she can use the data they carry when she discerns.

The gospel contemplation Ignatius describes has been such a gift, transforming prayer, making real the possibility of relationship with Christ and the Trinity, that many women unconsciously begin believing it is the one right way to pray. In times of 'not knowing how to pray any more' women hurt. What they know theoretically, that prayer does not always remain the same, they do not readily apply to their own prayer. They cannot read easily the invitation being given them. Words about the 'prayer of quiet' do not appear to describe their longing for Jesus Christ. Flailing about trying harder to pray, to contemplate, they fail to see that all their activity stops them from receiving that for which they long. If the director can help the woman who 'cannot pray' to stay with all of her experience and not just with her ideas about prayer, the woman will find her craving for Jesus Christ. As one who loves she wants to see him, look on him, hear him, attend to him, do and be for him. She knows him well enough so that they do not need to talk or to be busy all of the time. In ways new to her they can live all the moments and rhythms of life together. She contemplates.

Gospel contemplation has brought her to this relationship. In it she has grown quieter in prayer. Through gospel contemplation she learned to meet and receive Jesus Christ in prayer's communion. She can and will pray fruitfully again in this way. When by actively praying a gospel passage she is made alive to his presence, she can use this method. When Christ's presence shows itself in longing for him she can suffer her loneliness, speaking of it as one whom gospel contemplation has taught to see, hear and recognize him in all things, even felt absence. When all she can do is look on him from within she can rest contentedly in such presence. Prayer mediates Jesus Christ. Free to use a method of prayer because it serves as means to see him, hear him, be with him, she lets prayer do its work, wresting from her grip ideas about 'right prayer'.

She needs to accept the invitation, 'Come to me', living her way into it and its implications. People living together take on one another's accents. Oneness gives each a common vantage point from which to

look at everything. In ways that emphasize personal uniqueness they begin to think and feel alike, sharing attitudes and holding similar values. In loving the other each grows into herself or himself more completely, clinging less to self. Service, loving living itself, become privilege and gift.

In his invitation, 'Come to me', Jesus Christ opens the woman 'who lost him' to the transformation worked by love and life together. Once she was afraid of her loneliness; now he leads her through its door into the solitude contemplation requires. Spending time with him in contemplation she grows sensitive to his presence. Present and acting as incarnate Lord and her love, he is with her in every moment of every day, in everything filling her reality both when she feels it and when she cannot feel it. Nothing but Jesus Christ matters, and paradoxically because he matters everything else matters more than it has before. However much she now enjoys her *relationship* with him, still *he* is infinitely more important.

Slowly she learns to see the world from Christ's perspective. Viewing herself more clearly because she looks through his lenses, she sees something of what he sees, i.e. someone limited, broken and sinful, someone also infinitely important. Drawn by this vision she moves towards it, grounded ever more truly from within herself. She claims her personal authority more while needing to prove it less. She speaks, therefore, as one with voice.

Freed to recognize and respond to God's presence and so to choose freely to live her life in communion with God, she prays. When active, quiet or consoled, when hurting, restless or tempted, she can 'be with'. She can contemplate. Whatever means and methods she uses, this time in her spiritual life has formed a genuinely contemplative attitude within her. She realizes the invitation to contemplation offered by 'Nothing' – the invitation to tranquil abiding in the presence of God with Jesus Christ.