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The Freedom of Silence . . .

by the Rev. Dr. Timothy Hart-Andersen

One weekend forty years ago, on a high school youth group retreat, I had my first experience of what I would come to call years later a “thin place.”

I grew up in the manse, the child of a Presbyterian minister. My church life revolved around Sunday mornings in traditional Reformed, word-centered worship. Our confirmation class, which I took as a 14-year-old, focused on being able to say, “Yes, I believe.” Faith at that point was an intellectual exercise—and something of a leap for me. My inclination was simply to go through the motions, hoping that one day I would have a deeper experience of Christian faith. I longed in an unarticulated way for an inner stirring of the heart.

One weekend our youth group went on an overnight retreat in a Benedictine monastery. Each of us found ourselves occupying a single, simple, monk’s cell. Usually at a youth group event we were all together; this time, we were all alone. The hospitality with which the brothers in the monastery greeted us—and the openness which they offered—helped me feel welcome, and at home. The evening prayers, followed by silence throughout the monastery, introduced me to a new spiritual experience unlike anything I had known.

I remember lingering in the darkened chapel after prayers, the singing of the brothers still hanging in the air. The room shimmered with candle light; I looked at the icons and the images on the walls and in the niches. I tried the kneeling bench in the pew. I smelled the reminder of incense. I was utterly alone and on my own, but I sensed a Presence there with me. Nothing in my Protestant upbringing had prepared me for religious life of the sort I was glimpsing for the first time.

I walked the quiet hallways of the monastery, listening to the dark silence. I returned to the chapel several times during the night. Something kept drawing me there. The stillness of the place gave me an inner freedom I had not previously encountered. It was exhilarating.

Later I would recall that sense of being completely unencumbered and yet fully responsive to the Holy when I learned this prayer:

O God, light of the minds that know you,
life of the souls that love you,
strength of the thoughts that seek you:
Help us so to know you that we may truly love you,
so to love you that we may fully serve you,
whose service is perfect freedom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Afterwords

An ecumenical sampler of events and resources for spiritual growth, with a particular interest in the contemplative spiritual journey, published by the Spiritual Growth Community of Westminster Presbyterian Church



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Look for *Thin Places* at: www.thinplaces.us or www.ewestminster.org/thin_places

That night in the monastery I felt as if I had stepped for a moment into a parallel universe, another dimension of life that proved to be as real as anything I had known. I did not want to sleep, thinking it would disappear. The mysterious and unfathomable had come close; I had brushed up against something beyond and yet near. *A thin place.*

C.S. Lewis describes his own fleeting and unexpected experiences of the Holy as being "surprised by joy." Such was my own encounter that night long ago. Fortunately, as with Lewis, that would not be the last time I would glimpse into the presence of One who is the ground of our being, the source of life itself.

That monastery thin place was enough to torque my spiritual sensibility in a new trajectory which still guides me through life, four decades later. Outwardly I may seem merely to be reflecting the tradition in which I am most steeped—I am, after all, a Presbyterian minister! But my commitment to a contemplative dimension of Christian faith very much bears me along—as I preach and teach, as I lead meetings, develop plans, and publicly represent our congregation. Always I carry with me the deep, inner awareness that the Holy is not distant.

This little journal, *Thin Places*, first appeared out of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis, in the fall of 1999, when as I came as pastor. I had nothing to do with its inception or its publication but drawn to its potential and felt called to encourage and support it. *Thin Places* emerged from a small group of spiritual pilgrims in the congregation, inspired by the wisdom and energy of Marilyn and Alan Youel, the editors for the last ten years. Those of us who read and use each issue are grateful to both of them for their fruitful efforts.

I am delighted that over its first decade *Thin Places* has grown to be a respected resource for the contemplative life here in the Twin Cities—and even around the world. More than once I have been at a church gathering somewhere far away when someone has approached me and thanked me for the ministry of *Thin Places*.

As we mark the tenth anniversary of this journal, I trust you, as a reader, have found the writing and informa-

tion offered here to be of some help in your own spiritual journey. If a 16-year-old Protestant boy only mildly aware of the range of spiritual possibilities in life can find himself coming face-to-face with the Holy, one night in a Roman Catholic monastery, I figure there is hope for us all!

Thin places abound; ours is to have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the heart to embrace. Therein we find the perfect freedom that serving God offers.

Thanks be to God.

Tim Hart-Andersen is the Senior Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, a large downtown congregation with many social justice and outreach activities. His story seems to embody a core contemplative experience: that the journey in must necessarily lead to the journey out, that opening ourselves to God's unconditional love for us must necessarily lead to our being more loving towards others. He may be reached at: tim@wpc-mpls.org.

ONGOING OPPORTUNITIES

Loyola Spirituality Center, Serving Spiritual Seekers

Near the hum of Interstate 94 in St. Paul, MN, the Loyola Spirituality Center rests in the shadow of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church. Our 1960s building (formerly a convent) is fronted by a labyrinth, a peace garden, and a modest sign identifying Loyola, a thirty-three-year-old institution which has been located in this space for twenty three years.

Dick Rice was a Jesuit priest when he founded Loyola in 1977 at the invitation of Archbishop Roach who felt spiritual direction was especially needed in that time after Vatican II, when there were so many changes in the Catholic Church. In the beginning, staff members were either priests or sisters, and directees were primarily Catholics.

But that has changed dramatically. For many years now, men and women, young and old, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, those with no religion and professed religious have come to Loyola for spiritual direction. They come to listen and be heard, to discover their gifts and discern their call. They come to "find" God, and they come not sure exactly why they are coming.

The Loyola staff of seven —five women, two men, Catholic, Lutheran and Episcopalian—all have professional training and share a common mission: to help people notice, name and respond to the experience of God in their lives; to welcome all regardless of faith, age, race, sexual and gender orientation or economic means. But

"And Elijah came to a cave, and spent the night there, . . . and behold, the Lord passed by, and there came a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire

a sound of sheer silence. . . ."

I Kings, 9-12

even more importantly, they understand that God is the real Director, that the Divine is present when seeker and spiritual director show up together.

Offering spiritual direction—to those who seek to go deeper on their journey and to those who may be facing special times in their lives—remains our central ministry. But we also offer:

- workshops for individuals and for area churches and church staffs on subjects such as spiritual discernment, living the contemplative life, centering prayer, moving through life transitions, the Enneagram as a tool for self knowledge, and more;
- retreats: either one-day or extended silent retreats designed for the needs of a group;
- our Welcome Home program offers free spiritual direction to veterans and their families; and
- our spirituality of aging for seniors programs—in retirement centers and in church congregations—encourage life review, spiritual legacy, and preparing for end-of-life transitions.

Our 30th Anniversary DVD, *Listening From the Heart*, explains the ministry of spiritual direction. We publish a semi-annual newsletter which includes personal reflections by the staff and some of our special offerings. And fuller details may be found on our web-site, www.loyolaspirtualitycenter.org, or by contacting us at: **651.641.0008** or info@loyolaspirtualitycenter.org. Since our beginning, our goal and our promise have remained, “We’ll walk with you.”

Making Peace with the Past

As part of the Welcome Home for Veterans program, Loyola presents an evening with Episcopal priest, Michael Lapsley, founder of the Institute for the Healing of Memories, Cape Town, South Africa. In 1990 Father Lapsley lost both hands and an eye as a result of a letter bomb sent to his home during his involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Accompanied by prayers, love and support from around the world, he

began a journey from victim to survivor to victor. He now travels internationally to work with those who have experienced emotional, psychological and spiritual wounds inflicted by traumatic circumstances.

Thursday, October 22, 2009 7:00 -8:30 p.m.

Carondelet Center, 1890 Randolph, St. Paul

Note. Travel arrangements for the Rev. Lapsley are not yet firm, and this event may have to be modified.

For up-to-date information: 651-641-0008 or info@loyolaspirtualitycenter.org.

Christian Vespers

Christian Vespers at Carleton College in Northfield (like Thin Places) is entering its eleventh year. These weekly Taizé services-of prayer, song, scripture, and silence-have over the years become “thin places” for many at the college and in the community. All are welcome to join us for a time of candle-lit quiet and sung prayer.

Wednesdays during the school year, 8:30-9:00 p.m.

Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota
in the Skinner Memorial Chapel

To check our schedule or for more information:

<http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/chaplain> or
507.646.4003.

Thank You

As many will remember, *Thin Places* takes its name from the Celtic Christian metaphor for those times or places where the boundary between the sacred and the everyday feels “thin,” when our hearts are opened, and God’s presence is more strongly felt.

And it gets its being from the talents and labors-of-love of many. Tenth anniversary “*Thin Places* Thanks” to Kathy Fisher (who manages the many and varied practical details that allow it to happen), Kristin Kieft (who takes texts and artwork and ideas and turns them into a final form), Maurine Wilson for nine years and Sandy Wilson since last year (who send it out to you each time); to Eileen Muelkin, Ruby Hass, Ruth Hass, and Gaylord Strand; to the many Faithful Friends who forward information about up-coming Opportunities, month after month-and most of all . . .

to the nearly two thousand Readers, whose existence and presence feels like a cloud of witnesses . . .

like a very real, virtual community . . .

surrounding, supporting, exploring

the contemplative spiritual journey.

**Do you know someone who might like to read
Thin Places? (It’s sent free to all who request it.)**

**Do you know of an up-coming “Opportunity” that
might be of interest to others?**

**If ‘yes’ to either, please contact Kathy Fisher at:
kfisher@wpc-mpls.org or 612.332.3421**

Taizé Evening Prayer

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Edina is also beginning their eleventh year, having held their "very first First Friday Taizé Prayer in October of 1999." In the Chapel, overlooking a flowing stream, people gather each month for sung prayer, scripture, and silence in a candle-lit setting. Everyone is welcome.

First Friday of each month, 8:00-9:00 p.m.

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, in the Chapel
4439 West 50th Street, Edina
For information: 952.920.0595 or
lreynolds@ststephens.com.

Centering Prayer: "Be still and know that I am God"

The Centering Prayer group at St. Olaf Catholic Church in Minneapolis has been gathering every week-on Saturday mornings—for over sixteen years. This is an open group which people are invited to join as they are able. Some have been there almost every week. Others come for a while and then move on. All who come may begin to learn that Silence is the language of the spirit, that Centering prayer is a way of coming to our own center and finding the deep stillness that is there, within each of us.

Every Saturday morning, 9:00-11:00 a.m.

A satellite group also meets at St. Olaf each week-day morning. Many who work downtown come to begin their (busy) day with this time to be still.

Every Monday through Friday morning, 7:30-7:50 a.m.
St. Olaf Catholic Church, in Crowley Hall
215 South 8th Street, Minneapolis
For information: 612.332.7471 or
sr.joan.tuberty@juno.com.

. . . and many more

Lest any think that a single decade of *Thin Places* is significant, please remember that **Sacred Ground** began its ministry twelve years ago and that—in many ways—they are carrying forward the good work first begun by the Wayzata Cenacle Retreat House. **Wisdom Ways** has been offering its many explorations of spirituality ("Come be refreshed at wisdom's table") for over fifteen years, and the **Episcopal House of Prayer**—with its beautiful, peaceful Oratory and its guided retreats and workshops—has been

there in the woods at Collegetown for more than nineteen. The **Benedictine Center** at Saint Paul's Monastery has shared its sacred space and liturgical life and offered its workshops and retreats for over twenty-five years. And the **ARC Ecumenical Retreat Center** near Cambridge, and **Loyola** (introduced above), and the **Christos Center for Spirituality** are—all three—well into their fourth decades of ministry.

And even four decades may only be a good beginning. Consider the sisters at **Saint Benedict's Monastery** (who have been in St. Joseph for more than one hundred and forty six years) and the monks at **St. John's Abbey** (who settled on the Minnesota frontier more than one hundred and fifty three years ago)—who have nourished spiritual growth and health among many people over many generations, through their service and their example and their presence.

Truly, indeed, there have been—and will be—many ongoing opportunities, offered by many faithful servants throughout the region.

ONE-TIME OPPORTUNITIES

Seeking God's Embrace:**an Evening of Quiet and Reflection
with Scripture and Taizé-Style Song**

Following the prayer service, there will be short presentations on Christos offerings, including an introduction to spiritual direction. This evening will provide an excellent way to introduce friends to Christos and what it offers:

Monday, August 31st, 7:00-8:00 p.m.

Christos Center for Spiritual Formation
1212 Holly Drive, Lino Lakes, MN
For information: 651.653.8207 or
joycechristoscenter@msn.com.

"Will you drink from this cup?"

In response to many requests, last year's *Inner Leadership: Choosing to Learn from mentors on the Margin* is being offered again. This City House spiritual enrichment program—presented in collaboration with Christos Center for Spiritual Formation, Loyola Spirituality Center and Sacred Ground Center for Spirituality—draws upon our mission of spiritual direction, "Tending to the spiritual life of the poor, inspiring hope," recognizing that those who find themselves poor can mentor us, that "through them we can find power in

**"Grace is given not to lead us
into another identity . . .
but to reconnect us
to the beauty of our deepest identity."**

J. Philip Newell

humility, strength in weakness, and light in darkness.”

This program is for you if you want to deepen your relationship with God, with the poor, in a supportive environment of fellow learners:

Information & registration: Tuesday, Sept. 8, 7:00-9:00 p.m.

Seven additional bi-weekly sessions, Sept. 15-Dec. 8

Loyola Spirituality Center, 389 North Oxford St., St. Paul
For information or registration: 763.227.0686 or
tomallen@city-house.org or www.spiritonthemargins.org.

“Food for the Hungry Soul: Spiritual Formation and the Christian Life”

This is the theme for a year-long exploration of spiritual formation at Westminster, with “One-Time Opportunities” on most Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings and with some Saturday seminars. Here are a few possibilities:

- *Spirituality for the Church in the 21st Century*, the Rev. Peg Chamberlin, Sunday, September 13, in the Great Hall
- *Food for the Hungry Soul*, Joel Warne, Wednesdays, September 16, 23, 30, in the Meisel Room
- *Clarity and Mystery: Exploring the Concepts and Practices of Christian Spirituality*, Dr. Bradley Holt, Saturday Seminar, September 19, in the Meisel Room
- *Bent into Shape: Christian Spiritual Formation for the Second Ecumenical Century*, Dr. Patrick Henry, Sunday, September 20, in the Great Hall
- and many more:

Most Sunday mornings (9:15-10:15 a.m.) and Wednesday Evenings (6:30-8:00 p.m.) plus some Saturday Seminars (8:30 a.m.-2:00 p.m.)

Westminster Presbyterian Church,
1200 Marquette Avenue, Minneapolis
For full information: 612.332.3421 or
KMichael@wpc-mpls.org or
www.ewestminster.org/adult_education.

Introduction to Centering Prayer

Learn this ancient practice of prayer—taught by the Desert Mothers and Fathers—that heightens the sense of God’s presence in your life. When words and activity become too much, it is time for quiet in the arms of God:
Saturday, September 12, 9:00 a.m.-3:15 p.m.

The Benedictine Center, 2675 East Larpenteur, St. Paul
For information or registration: 651.777.7251 or
benedictinecenter@stpaulsmonastery.org.

Spiritual R&R

Do you know someone who needs a day away? Perhaps they are struggling to find a new job in these tough economic times. Perhaps they provide care for others full-time and could use a day to restore their spirit. We invite you to come and bring a friend for a quiet, relaxing and reflective day at the Spirituality Center. Experience the power of God’s presence in your life in a peaceful setting. Come anytime and stay as long as you wish.

Spend time in personal prayer, walk the labyrinth, read in our library, visit with a spiritual companion, relax in our lounge or just be at peace. No cost (optional lunch for \$7.00 or bring your own):

Friday, September 18, and Friday, October 9, 9:00 a.m.-3:30 p.m.

Saint Benedict’s Monastery, St. Joseph

For information: 320.363.7112 or dmanuel@csbj.edu.

Group Spiritual Direction Workshop & Retreat

Offered by the Shalem Institute, this retreat will enable you to experience Group Spiritual Direction within a prayerful community, deepen your contemplative grounding through authentic sharing and faithful listening, and expand your capacity to listen to God:

Thursday, Sept. 24, at 6:00 p.m.-Monday, Sept. 28, after lunch

St. John’s Abbey Guesthouse, Collegeville

For information or registration: 301.897.7334, ext. 209 or lalindbloom@earthlink.net or www.shalem.org, then “Short Programs” then “2009 Program Calendar.”

A Celtic Liturgy

St. Mathew’s is adding to their rich roster of “Opportunities” by including special prayers and Eucharistic prayers from Iona Abbey plus Celtic music selections in Sunday morning Worship beginning in October:

Sunday, October 4, 10:30 a.m.-noon

This to be in addition to their:

“The joy of God . . .”

Jesus says, “I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly” *John 10:10*

Second Century Bishop Irenaeus writes,

“The joy of God . . . is a human being fully alive.”

Centering Prayer Group, every Saturday,
9:00-10:00 a.m.

Ignatian Spirituality Group, Third Thursdays,
7:00-8:30 p.m.

Lectio Divina, Journaling and Meditation,
Every other Wednesday, beginning September 23,
7:30-9:00 p.m.

St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, 2136 Carter Ave., St. Paul
For information: lisd@comcast.net or
651.645.3058 or www.stmatthewsmn.org.

Christ the Divine Therapist

The Centering Prayer Community at Colonial Church of Edina begins its new season of Thursday gatherings with this special presentation by Sr. Mary White, OSB:

Thursday, October 8, 5:30-8:00 p.m.

Colonial Church of Edina, 6200 Colonia Way, Edina
For information: 952.893.0673 or
aloddigs@colonialchurch.org.

Also beginning in October, a

Soul Friends Group

This welcoming and community building group is intended for all those who wish to share the journey and learn from each other. The foundation of the group will be Centering Prayer, but you will not need to be doing the practice to join us on the Fourth Saturday of each month:

Saturday, October 23, 9:30 a.m. to noon

For information: 952.893.0673.

A River Hard to See: An Observance of the Celtic New Year and an Honoring of Life's Stages

The network of churches and organizations which brought **J. Philip Newell** to the Twin Cities last May continues and is offering an evening to explore "Awakening, to the stages of our lives, as we are experiencing them right now," based on the themes set out by Philip for the stages of life in his ***One Foot in Eden: Sunday, November 1, 7:00-9:00 p.m.***

Carondelet Center, 1890 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul
For information: 651.69632788 or
blund@csjsstpaul.org or www.wisdomwayscenter.org.

The Bethany Spring Retreat Center

. . . is operated by the Merton Institute for Contemplative Living, is located very close to Gethsemane Monastery, and offers its excellent *Bridges to Contemplative Living* retreats and more: e.g., *Reading Mary Oliver: An American Contemplative* and *The Language the Earth Speaks*.

For information: contactus@mertoninstitute.org or
502.899.1991

The International Merton Society is the major organization sponsoring scholarship exploring Thomas Merton's life, writings and work. Its "Fall 2009 Newsletter," containing details of up-coming events and much other news is available online at:

www.merton.org/ITMS/newsletter16-2.htm.

. . . and there are many additional Autumn Opportunities:

These coming months seem particularly rich, with additional opportunities at most of the organizations noted above (e.g., the Midwest Labyrinth Festival) . . . and many more at main-stay spirituality centers like:

- Sacred Ground, sacredground@sacredgroundspirit.org or 651.696.2798 or www.sacredgroundspirit.org.
- Episcopal House of Prayer, 320.363.3293 or houseprayer@csbsju.edu.
- ARC Ecumenical Retreat Center, 736.689.3540 or office@arcetreat.org or www.arcetreat.org.
- St. John's Abbey, 320.363.3969 or rpierson@csbsju.edu or www.saintjohnsabbey.org/retreats.

**“ . . . to touch and grasp Him as He is,
though in darkness . . . ”**

“True contemplation is the work of a love that transcends all satisfaction and all experience to rest in the night of pure and naked faith. This faith brings us so close to God that it may be said to touch and grasp Him as He is, though in darkness.

And the effect of such a contact is often a deep peace that overflows into the lower faculties of the soul and thus constitutes an ‘experience.’ Yet that experience or feeling of peace always remains *an accident* of contemplation, so that the passing of the immediate [thin places] experience does not mean that our contact with God has ceased . . . ”

Thomas Merton,
New Seeds of Contemplation

Everything Belongs: the Gift of Contemplative Prayer and *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*, by Richard Rohr.

Over the summer, elements in the adventure of these last ten years have kept creeping back into memory. And out of this gentle rumination has come a sense that the words looked at and read that have seemed to connect most strongly were words written by a woman or man who had something thoughtful to say, but who spoke from the heart, who didn't have a personal agenda, who seemed—in the opening words of the Sermon on the Mount—"poor in spirit."

A voice remembered is that of Richard Rohr, whose *Everything Belongs: the Gift of Contemplative Prayer* first appeared in the year *Thin Places* began, and whose *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*—its awaited sequel—is to be published in early September this year. As its title suggests, the nominal subject of *Everything Belongs* is "the gift of contemplative prayer." But its broader interest—like that in most of Fr. Richard's books—is in exploring what it is like . . . and what is needful . . . if one is to be intentionally on the Way.

Many of the ideas and insights introduced in *Everything Belongs* have been developed and refined in the years since it appeared, something that is easily appreciated if one receives Fr. Richard's Question-of-the-Day emails (go to www.cacradicalgrace.org, then click on "Daily Meditation"). Here are a few, noticed and recorded:

- "When we 'know God in ourselves and ourselves in God,' as Teresa of Avila advised, we have the freedom to be poor and ordinary. We don't have to prove anything, we don't have to defend anything, and we return from this interior place to the world with greater and enduring strength. And with this strength we're flung back into the world unafraid."
- "Contemplative prayer is still the heart of the matter. It is a changing of our consciousness, really new mental software. . . . And for this to happen, an immense change must occur in the way we think.

Malcolm Gladwell's brilliant book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* puts us on the right track. This is not a new concept; in fact, it was used in the 16th century by Francisco de Osuna, Teresa of Avila's teacher, who said we must learn to 'pensar sin pensar,' 'to think without thinking.' And this is what we are being asked to do: to make an immense change in the way we think, which will not feel like thinking at all in the way we have been accustomed."

- "Jesus and many others understood a higher level of thinking. More mature levels of religion recognize a need to teach people another way of processing reality, different than judging everything, analyzing everything, explaining everything, fixing everything or fearing everything.

I am convinced that the original word for this was the word prayer! *When we said we were going to pray about something, we meant we were going to look at it with a different set of eyes than fixing, controlling or complaining eyes.* However, nobody ever taught us to use our 'third eye.'

- "This concept of the third eye goes back to the eleventh century in Paris with Richard and Hugh in the monastery of St. Victor. They said that our set of two eyes puts us into dualistic and either/or thinking. *What we need is a "third eye" which synthesizes the whole picture and sees non-dually and therefore can see God and Mystery.* Contemplation is learning to see with that third eye (which I am convinced is a natural capacity)."
- "The "Eight Beatitudes" (*Matthew 5*) are from the highest level of consciousness, which is entirely 'unitive' and non-dualistic thinking. The contemplative mind allows us to surrender to what reality IS at the deepest level. It allows life to be something bigger and broader than the non-dual mind can ever see. From this higher level, the Beatitudes, and all the teachings of Jesus and other mystics make sense. The ordinary person can now know God, while the heady Christian knows nothing but his own head."

And the adventure goes on, with good voices still to be heard, and *The Naked Now* ordered and on its way. . . .

**"How happy are the poor in spirit:
the kingdom of Heaven is theirs"**

Matt. 5:3

"What an opening line! I always say this one liner is the beginning of Jesus' inaugural address, a key to everything Jesus will teach and live. . . . To be 'poor in spirit' means to live without a need for your own rightness, or any sense of moral superiority to anyone else. It's a free inner emptiness, with no outer need for advancing your own reputation or any opinionated one-upmanship. . . . Inner poverty precedes and lays the foundation for a simple, non-consuming lifestyle . . ."

Richard Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for the New World*



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“The freedom of silence . . .”
“the gift of awareness . . .”



AFTERWORDS: The gift of awareness . . .

A Story. For a long time the Sunday morning corporate Prayer of Confession did not seem very prayer-full. Perhaps part of it was that the language sometimes seemed one-size-fits-all and, therefore, not specifically appropriate or accurate to a perhaps too literal mind. But probably even more significant was an underlying, unarticulated sense or wish to believe, “I’m not really bad . . . I try pretty hard . . . we’re the good guys . . .” And then there came this Russian spiritual classic, *The Pilgrim’s Tale*, in which the pilgrim seems to have gotten somewhere by praying, unceasingly, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” And then over time the Jesus Prayer started coming unbidden more and more often as morning centering began . . . silently repeating itself . . . until a deeper silence seemed to come.

Something was happening. Unexpected as it was, the creeping in of the Jesus Prayer seemed to make a difference. Perhaps it was just a case of “too soon old, too late smart.” But somehow earlier and ingrained overtones of, “I am a sinner,” were shifting. Confession seemed less to be saying, “I’m bad” or “I failed,” than to be acknowledging that, “much as I want to do it right, I too often fall short.” And this shift feels like a gift. For what confession seems to do—both in public and in private—is to be a giving up of pretense, and with this giving up somehow bringing a measure of peace, somehow making one more free . . . more open to change.

Paul urges the Colossians, and us, to

“put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, . . .” [Col. 3:12-14]

But Paul also confesses, in tones of anguish, *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate. . . .”* [Romans 7:14]

Perhaps it is just this human reality that makes awareness a gift. And it may be that it is not too late smart if one can learn to enter fully into heart-felt prayers of confession.