

A Contemplative in the City

A Meditation

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BEING THERE

Contemplation is inseparable from life and from the activities which go on in particular lives.

Being there:

The ministry of "Reaching Out" was initiated in 1978. This means first and foremost for me 'being there' for anyone living in the Earls Court area, situated between central and west London. It is 'being there' for those who are seeking some form of alternative support and assistance, whatever the source or nature of their differing needs. At the same time it means for me daring to be vulnerable to the call of God and towards those who call on me.

Being there:

'Being there' is nurtured by a prayerful listening to God, to others and to myself as a contemplative activator quietly and unobtrusively reaching out into the area of Earls Court and beyond.

Being there:

'Being there' as a contemplative activator began as an inner movement, drawing me towards the edges of society and the Church as institution. The inspiration for this was the peripatetic ministry of Jesus towards 'the least of these my brothers and sisters' (Matthew 25.40) and the lives of two completely different men of this century: Charles de Foucauld and Thomas Merton. Both had been 'men of the world' before embarking on the contemplative life within their separate communities. Both are still having a great effect on the universal Church. Both have died to live for God and through God for others. Both remained obedient to the mystery of Love and its 'costing not less than everything'.

Being there:

This means 'being there' in the desert of a high priority inner city area where persons are abused by poverty, homelessness, unemployment, high pollution and various addictions. The scars of these different abuses lead to personal and family breakdown, often resulting in depersonalisation. This in turn leads to fear because it mirrors our own potential for being there as unwanted persons.

Being there:

In 1970, while working at Centrepoint in Soho, London, with young homeless persons from all over the UK, I often found myself sitting in the simple chapel of St. Anne's above the Night Shelter. This taught me how essential this is for me and for the ministry with the homeless, to be bathed in the sea of contemplative prayer, leading to contemplative action.

Being there:

This means 'being there' in the presence and silence of the mystery which embraces the all of life including the wounds of life. 'Being there' is an activity which can be welcomed by all, regardless of faith or no faith.

Being there:

In 1975 I entered a religious order and tested the 'religious life' for about three years. This was a very valid and enriching experience which released a growing awareness within me of an urge to live the contemplative life in the desert of the inner city.

Being there:

In 1978 I visited one of my earliest 'soul friends' who then lived on the edge of Earls Court. While walking back to the tube station, I suddenly knew I had to live and 'be there' for whoever might call on me. I discussed this intuition with Mother Mary Clare, another of my 'soul friends'. It seemed to be a response to my increasing belief that the Church should be increasingly nurtured by a 'cellular' ministry.

Being there:

In 1978, supported by the Sisters of the Love of God, an Anglican Carmelite Community, by the Diocesan and Area Bishops and the local Deanery and parish, Reaching Out became a small cell of contemplative action within the Earls Court area. This allows for a ministry of sharing from within the sacredness of each other's vulnerabilities and strengths where there is no 'them' and 'us'. This 'being there' is made possible with financial support from various sources.

Being there:

Out of the contemplative action grew first of all the healing services at St. Cuthbert's the local Anglican parish church.

Being there:

This was followed by the bi-weekly homilies in the parish Church and the monthly healing notices in the parish magazines.

Being there:

In 1985 the Streetwise Youth Project came into being through regular contact with young males involved in the sex industry on the streets locally. Many of them are aged 16-18 and occasionally younger. I became aware of the severe lack of any kind of understanding or provision for these young men. I was particularly shocked by the murder of one young boy aged 15 who had 'worked' the area. The pioneering work of Streetwise Youth was initiated to meet the needs of such men.

Being there:

In 1987 the Body Positive Centre for people living with the challenges of HIV/AIDS came into being.

Being there:

In 1990 the St. Cuthbert's social advisory centre was started to help the many who fall through the local care network. They are usually the unemployed, often existing in single rooms with no cooking facilities. Many have suffered from serious mental health problems; all need a place of meeting and acceptance of them as persons, unique – like all of us – in their own way.

Being there:

In 1982 HIV and AIDS came on the scene. 'Being there' meant a ministry to those living with the challenge of this personal and pandemic disease.

Being there:

Twelve years into this pandemic disease I am aware that much of the Church institution is very fearful of the HIV virus that it carries in its brothers and sisters. This fear leads to a judgmental and rejecting attitude as it continues to be unwilling to be alongside those who mirror its own weaknesses and its own vulnerability. It also highlights the fact that the Church seems to be living in fear of the different sexual orientations, preventing it from recognising and acceding relationships which are co-creative of the pair, excluding them from the mystery of loving each other physically, mentally, socially and spiritually.

Being there:

'Being there' has and is teaching me a lot about the co-creative challenges as well as the many negative aspects of the disease. It continues to affirm for me that there is no 'them' and 'us'. We are all vulnerable to disease and death. We are all either infected or affected by disease and our daily living includes our daily dying.

Being there:

This continues to teach me so much about the pain of loving and being loved. It tells me a great deal about receiving care from those who have allowed and continue to allow me into their sacred and special places of need. As I learn how to drop labels that separate, and be more human towards others, I can reach out from within a strong co-commitment which is mutually liberational.

Being there:

It is teaching me a lot about the gift of differing friendships and life-styles and their co-creative potential. It teaches me about daring to be vulnerable.

Being there:

It means learning about being spiritual rather than religious. In this area I am expected to be a universal person, centred on the line of the great divide between the inward and the outward. To be universal is 'to be a truly catholic person, who refuses to hold God captive in a single religious tradition; it is rather to recognise that God is above all religious traditions as Saviour and Judge of all. It is to realise that the God whom Christians worship is not a Christian God, in the sense of belonging only to Christian people. God is, if one may say so, a Catholic God; that is, a God of all peoples who acts in all and leaves traces of his/her presence in all that is authentic in religious traditions, rituals and stories in whatever part of the world they may be found. ¹

Being there:

Being there alongside those who are living the challenges of HIV/AIDS has opened up for me the mystery of spiritualities nurtured by faith. In so doing I have come to realise that many who are searching for a way of expressing refer to this as 'the mystery'. Such persons are first and foremost looking for someone who is utterly human, that is, someone who is 'being' the Gospel of Love, nurtured by prayer and openness to the workings of God within them. This means that for me spiritual persons are those who are simply aware of God as 'the mystery'. I see God as my 'ultimate' non-rejecting lover. Both can be known in different ways in ordinary everyday life.

Being there:

'Being there' demands of me that I live as a person free of labels except that of being Bill. This is essential if I am to live life with its risks and temptations. As I get in touch with the contemplative dimensions which give my life meaning I am being released to be free and also being a liberational person for others.

The greatest risk for me is allowing myself to be too available, too busy, and thus to become starved of the silence and solitude which I need if I am to be freely available and attentive in the manner which is creative for all concerned.

As I pray within and before the mystery of God for the world and for all God's people, I can identify with Thomas Merton when he writes, 'I am talking about a special dimension of inner discipline and experience, a certain integrity and fullness of personal development which are not compatible with action, with creative work, with dedicated love. On the contrary, all these go together'. ²

Being there:

Staying with the cell of hope and opening with it reveals everything to me without being disturbed by this. It has also revealed the advantages of being on my own with God and those others who for whatever reasons may wish to share in the silence of simply being there for God and for one another.

Being there:

'Being there' is nurtured by those who visit, however infrequent; by the letters I receive; by the telephone conversations; by reading newspapers and watching television. Personal and world events demand my deepest concern and I learn to weep for the world and for individuals. I also learn how to be in awe of the world and the uniqueness of every person I meet.

Being there:

If I can unite myself through contemplative action with all the peoples of the world; if I can prepare in myself for the reunion of all who are the rejects of society, through seeing the mystery of God within every person hidden behind labels which so often depersonalise, then I will be on the way to becoming a person of reconciliation: a person who accepts that we are not only 'one'd' to God but also to each other, as together we plunge into the deep heart of the word. In order to do this, I have to listen more attentively to the deepest and the most neglected persons of our time (freely adapted from Merton³).

Being there:

'Being there' is nurtured by the freedom to be who I really am as a human person, with the gifts of my vulnerability and strength. There is the freedom to be available for others while living a simple life, open to God in such a way that I am encouraged to be truthfully open to others.

Being there:

It is teaching me about the mystery of love and of God who is not only Father but also Mother. 'Being there' continues to nurture my understanding and acceptance of loving and being loved. This is every person's natural birth right, but millions continue to be deprived of it.

Being there:

'Being there' constantly awakens me to the fact that the external and internal aspects of my journey depend on my willingness to be open to the creative actions of hope and of love. This is nurtured by the very real fact that contemplation is inseparable from life and from the activities that are part of my life and of the lives of all those who seek a way into their own lives.

Being there:

This area of need puts me into deeper awareness of my innermost self, my contemplative self alongside my active self, my most vulnerable and valuable self, where I have been and still am being faced with the ultimate questions about life and perhaps more importantly, about dying and death. What do these essential questions mean for me as a person, as a minister/priest who happens to be gay, a member of the Christian movement, but also as a member of the community of all God's people?

References:

- ¹ Shannon, W.H. 1992, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, New York, Crossroad Publishing Co.
- ² Merton, T. 1971, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, London, George Allen and Unwin.
- ³ Merton, T. 1968, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, New York, Doubleday Image Books.