

Books for the Spiritual Seeker

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Books Discussed:

Be Still: Designing and Leading Contemplative Retreats, by Jane E. Vennard (Alban Institute, 2000)

Celtic Benediction: Morning and Night Prayer, by J. Philip Newell (Eerdmans, 2000).

In Ordinary Time: Healing the Wounds of the Heart, by Roberta Bondi (Abingdon Press, 1996)

Clergy Wellness and Mutual Ministry, rev. ed. by Pamela Lee Cranston and the Clergy Wellness Commission. (Episcopal Diocese of California, 2000; available only from The Clergy Wellness Commission, 1055 Taylor Street, San Francisco, CA 94108).

For Those We Love But See No Longer: Daily Offices for Times of Grief, by Lisa Belcher Hamilton (Paraclete Press, 2001)

MissionStClare.com (a prayer website)

My Soul in Silence Waits: Meditations on Psalm 22, by Margaret Guenther. (Cowley Publications, 2000).

Praying With Body and Soul: A Way to Intimacy With God, by Jane E. Vennard (Augsburg, 1998)

The Relaxation Response, by Herbert Benson MD (William Morrow, 1975)

Still Listening: New Horizons in Spiritual Direction, ed Norvene West (Morehouse, 2000).

Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life, by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Hyperion, 1994)

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," Thoreau observed—and that was long before the days of cell phones, voice mail, email, pagers, or Palm Pilots. As sociologists document in great detail, most people feel mostly frazzled, exhausted, vaguely guilty, and above all utterly trapped by deeply toxic socio-economic structures. And *that* predicament, I propose, is what invites the Spirit. We are beset by demons that only prayer can drive out—prayer, not better management skills, a better job, or even an obedient voltage-regular battery-backup guarding our computers against errant electrons.

Teaching spiritual seekers about prayer, or about how to pray, is certainly fundamental to inviting the Spirit. But where to begin? The Buddhists have beaten us at this, I suggest, because they don't have to cope with an incarnate God. This God made manifest within history and ordinary human experience makes for an awfully complex religion to introduce to the utterly unchurched, to those many who are absolutely illiterate about any religious belief or practice, East or West. A whole array of popular books on Buddhist meditation practice, however, bring a long and sophisticated pedagogical tradition to bear in explaining very patiently how to center the attention, breathe quietly, and endeavor to remain attentively detached from the incessant babble in the background of consciousness. Contrast that with the dense theological complexity of the Jesus Prayer! And yet the techniques are essentially the same—in fact, they were secularized quite thoroughly by Robert Benson MD, in the research behind his book, *The Relaxation Response* (William Morrow, 1975).

Benson is a behaviorist, a believer in classical conditioning; and he was initially interested in developing biofeedback techniques for reducing hypertension. He started studying meditation when proponents of Transcendental Meditation approached him insisting that their program achieved the same ends without the complex and extremely expensive monitoring devices required for biofeedback. One thing led to another, and despite Benson's considerable unease around anything even faintly religious, he did eventually demonstrate empirically that classical meditation technique has a whole array of physiological consequences that are the biological opposite of stress reactions. Meditation generates alpha brainwaves, which are associates with relaxed states (p.82); it reduces circulating levels of substances that trigger anxiety (p. 92); over time it

reduces blood pressure (Chapter 6); it reduces metabolic rates as signaled by oxygen consumption (p.87); and so forth—including less drinking, cigarette-smoking, and use of recreational drugs. In short, the Buddhists begin by teaching people a spiritual practice that in a very physical way consoles their frazzled spirits.

Far more subtle and useful than Benson's *The Relaxation Response* is Jon Kabat-Zinn's classic book, *Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (Hyperion, 1994). It's one of those books I spend a couple of hours rereading every time I start finding myself too busy to pray, which happens more often than I'm willing to admit in public. Kabat-Zinn is a cell physiologist at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, where among other things he teaches classes in meditation as a technique for the non-chemical control of chronic pain. To do so to a general audience in an American city, he has had to extract mindfulness meditation as a technique from the Buddhist context in which he learned it, but he does so with grace, care, and considerable sophistication. He quotes Thoreau repeatedly, for instance; and furthermore he does so quite intelligently and with an alert sensitivity to the place of American Transcendentalism in our cultural history.

What distinguishes Kabat-Zinn's book from others like it is how astutely he deals with all the initial questions of motive and meaning with which an absolute beginner will struggle. He really does make it possible to get started doing this, or doing it again, which is why I keep going back to his book. He opens up awareness of the God-shaped hole in our lives by how adeptly he describes all the ways in which we endeavor to avoid engaging what the nuns taught me to call "the sacrament of the present moment." But he submerges the metaphysical and doctrinal issues--Buddhist or Christian--that can pose such enormous obstacles for newcomers who are simply and genuinely struggling to learn what prayer is and how to "do" it.

Instead he more simply offers practical help to anyone struggling to silence the endless, soul-numbing mental chatter of worries, complaints, and preoccupations with past or future. With quiet good humor, he offers an accounts of what the insides of our heads sound like most of the time. *Wherever You Go There You Are* is a contemporary, accessible book on meditation that is as applicable to introducing Christian spirituality

as to introducing Buddhism, because Kabat-Zinn's intent is to provide stress control techniques in an utterly secular setting. The key here is that at the outer edges of silence and acceptance, I find the Presence of God, the Spirit swooping in sometimes with consolation but sometimes with talons bared. That is what Christian tradition in fact predicts: wherever we go there we are, and there God is also. Our attachment to all the petty judgments and opinions and chatter endlessly flowing through our own heads is how we keep God at bay.

If you keep that fact in mind, then it will be perfectly evident where one might add a little Christian reflection and teaching to Kabat-Zinn's basic account, because he brings some serious ethical concerns and psychological sophistication to the question of what happens when we systematically silence all our own defenses against deeply experiencing our own lives. It is indeed an iffy thing to unplug the voltage regulators of that system. He knows what he is skimming over, and so he regularly cautions his readers that sooner or later meditation practice will lead them to engage all their own moral allegiances and ethical standards.

Once a rudimentary meditation practice is established, the next step, so to speak, is adding the theological frame: when we silence all the silly chatter, God is there. "Who is God" is one of the larger questions in the tradition, of course; and for that a retreat or retreat-like series of classes for spiritual seekers might be just the thing. For such a project, take a look at Jane E. Vennard, *Be Still: Designing and Leading Contemplative Retreats* (Alban Institute, 2000). Vennard offers the quality of solid, practical advice one would expect from Alban, but she does so in a gentle and sophisticated way. Although times she offers firm advice hard-won from difficult experience, for the most part she discusses the range of alternatives and practical considerations that a retreat leader needs to consider.

These accounts are rich, sympathetic, and deeply inviting. I was particularly pleased by her unflagging confidence that the Spirit is always meddling with our best laid plans, and by the intelligence of her advice about how to cope when something doesn't go as planned. The retreat structures that she describes of course need to be filled out with some variety of particular thematic content, but resources for that are abundant. What

she does so brilliantly is to show us how to anchor those resources in the ongoing practice of silent attentiveness to God's presence in the present moment.

The scope of *Be Still* is wider than its subtitle, *Designing and Leading Contemplative Retreats*. She locates the contemplative retreat within the larger context of spiritual formation programming at the parish level, and furthermore she sketches the ongoing interplay between intentional contemplative prayer ministries and the general array of parish activities. She talks about clergy plainly staking out prayer time in their daily lives and retreat time in their annual schedules—and in their contracts with parishes. Her bibliography is rich in resources for doing all such things, and her annotations are models of how annotations should be written.

I was so impressed with *Be Still* that I'm going to go back to Vennard's earlier book, *Praying With Body and Soul: A Way to Intimacy With God* (Augsburg, 1998), which has been sitting unread on my "to read" shelf for several years now. It's an account of ways to invite and to respond to God's immediate presence within our embodied lives and physical surroundings.

As part of her argument about the role of contemplative spirituality in practical parish life, Vennard plainly insists that parish clergy must attend carefully to their own spiritual practices, and that they should take several contemplative retreats before trying to lead one. So take a quick honest glance: is prayer time blocked out on your weekly calendar? Do you get release time for both a retreat and a vacation? Under any circumstances, take a look at *Clergy Wellness and Mutual Ministry: A Resource for Clergy and Congregations*, from Pamela Lee Cranston and the Clergy Wellness Commission of the Episcopal Diocese of California. Short good chapters address such topics as clergy roles and parish expectations, job descriptions, clergy lifestyles, and components of clergy health.

If, as Alan Jones argues in his essay in this issue, the Spirit is chronically messing in our messy historical realities, then the Spirit is immediately present within the sort of commonplace conundrums of clergy who never have an evening at home with their families. Parishioners can make the same impossible demands of clergy as their employers make of them, in short, and so finding a way to name and to pray about that

particular demon is vitally important to spiritual growth across the board. A small, concise book like this one, addressed both to clergy and to parishioners, can get that conversation started. There's also a warm, inviting website brimming with hotlinks and good information from Cranston and the Clergy Wellness Commission: www.diocal.org./diocese/clergy_wellness_commission/index.html.

(And while I'm thinking of websites, here's another relevant one that provides beautifully formatted Morning and Evening Prayer services from the Book of Common Prayer, plus a one-page introduction to praying that is as good as anything I've ever seen: www.missionstclare.com. It's not from a monastery or convent, but from St. Clare County CA, home of Silicon Valley and the various computer-industry folks who keep this site running. The site lists other resources and accepts prayer requests as well. Spending time there does generate something like a sense of praying with others, particularly since each service includes words and simple organ music for a couple of hymns. Furthermore, I know that others visiting the site are also seeking in some way to pray "with" me. It's no substitute for going to church; but it's better than sitting entirely alone, which all too often is my only option given how many churches in this diocese use incense on a regular basis. GenXers are said to be particularly open to this sort of resource.)

Priests who start actively responding to the newcomers and seekers lurking in the margins will sooner or later find themselves face-to-face with one of them. To the extent that crises often set people off on the spiritual journey, such conversations can be pastorally challenging. A good resource for that challenge is *Still Listening: New Horizons in Spiritual Direction*, edited by Norvene West (Morehouse, 2000).

Although some aspects of every essay are going to be relevant only to regular, intentional spiritual directors, every essay illuminates the particular challenges of pastoral relationships with a whole variety of folks. The first section addresses pastoral care of the addicted, the traumatized, the dying, the "wary seeker," those on the socio-economic margins, and those dealing with issues related to their sexual orientation, etc.. A second section discusses pastoral care within a whole array of social issues: economic justice, sexuality generally, congregational life, visual as distinct from verbal

thinking, etc. Throughout the volume, both the psychology and the spirituality are quite sophisticated. There is no hint of pseudo-therapeutic babble or patronizing "political correctness."

Furthermore, the writing is uniformly excellent. Spiritual direction may be a ministry of kindly silence in many regards, but Norvene West has brought together spiritual directors of uncommon verbal skill. Her book also offers fascinating insight into what pastoral work actually demands. This is a richly useful book for not only for working clergy but also for CPE students or for parishioners training for intentional ministry within their own congregation.

But no matter how much programming or one-on-one conversation a parish might offer, there's still an abiding need for books one can simply hand to spiritual seekers, especially those who are either theologically illiterate or recovering from some earlier, abusive encounter with organized religion. Margaret Guenther, who writes a stunning chapter on ministry to the dying in Vest's volume, has a new little book of her own these days, *My Soul in Silence Waits: Meditations on Psalm 62* (Cowley, 2000), which would be wonderful in this regard. Its eight chapters are presented as the basis of a contemplative retreat (at-home or away) but they could easily provide the reflection for eight weeks of Taize services, or the basis of an intentional exercise in spiritual formation within any parish small group or, of course, individual reflection.

I always blaze through such books without a pause for breath, skimming the questions for reflection with a critical eye alone. If I like it, I make a note to myself to go back, more thoughtfully, another time. But I couldn't do that with this book, which has never happened before. I had it with me at the airport late one winter night, waiting in an empty terminal to greet a traveler delayed for hours by the weather. It was a perfect setting for skimming through a well written, attractively printed little book. I couldn't do it. Her questions were that engaging. In fact, I still haven't finished it. It's that good. And it is accessible for those Norveen Vest calls the "wary seekers," the skeptical, starving, post-modern wanderers who need to be led into prayer even as they begin to struggle with all of their misgivings and misconceptions.

Another marvelous resource for newcomers is J. Philip Newell's *Celtic Benediction*:

Morning and Night Prayer (Eerdmans, 2000). Page design, by Vera Brice, is outstanding; the printing itself, by Tien Wah Press in Singapore, is art-book quality. Each step in the prayer has a gloriously reproduced page or detail from the Lindisfarne Gospels, to capture the eye while the soul ponders what the words said or invited. Even the blank space, generously offered, has the rich visual texture of vellum—not blank at all, but suggesting the vibrant silence offered by skillful liturgists.

The daily prayer services move through themes loosely associated with the seven days of creation; each service repeatedly invites silent contemplative prayer. Here's one of the morning prayers for today, which happens to be Wednesday:

For the first showings of the morning light

and the emerging outline of the day

Thanks be to you, O God.

For earth's colours drawn forth by the sun

its brilliance piercing clouds of darkness

and shimmering through leaves and flowing waters

thanks be to you.

Show to me this day

Amidst life's dark streaks of wrong and suffering

The light that endures in every person.

Dispel the confusions that cling close to my soul

That I may see with eyes washed by your grace

That I may see myself and all people

With eyes cleansed by the freshness of the new day's light.

Pray for the coming day and for the life of the world.

Both in its words and in its visual impact, *Celtic Benediction* shows the stunning difference between Christian meditation and meditation practiced either as mere neurophysiological technique or within a legitimately Eastern metaphysics—much less a vaguely New-Age pantheism.

In his short introduction, Newell distinguishes between what he calls a "Mediterranean" tradition that what is deepest within us is our sinfulness, and a "Celtic" tradition that what is deepest within us is the image of God—distorted and obscured, of course, but unquestionably there. Roberta Bondi offers the same distinction, albeit in somewhat different language, in her book, *In Ordinary Time: Healing the Wounds of the Heart* (Abingdon Press, 1996). What Newell attributes to the Celts she also finds in the desert Abbas and Ammas: what's wrong in our lives is not so much our deliberate, freely chosen sin so much as our suffering—our blindness, the injuries to our ability to love and to be loved. Meditation practice leads directly into the terrible healing power of God's love, which is a belief or an experience diametrically opposite the Eastern doctrines of "illusion" and "detachment."

Death and loss are high on the list of crises that initiate the spiritual quest, and for that situation one might consider Lisa Belcher Hamilton, *For Those We Love But See No Longer: Daily Offices for Times of Grief* (Paraclete Press, 2001). She presents seven days' worth of four daily offices in a small, sturdy book that is designed to be carried around: it's hardly bigger than my checkbook and less than half an inch thick. For times when grief and loss abide within consciousness, regularly welling up and putting a halt to almost everything else, a book like this can be sustaining because it is, in a way, permission to be devastated within the promise of consolation.

Her four daily services are based very closely on the Book of Common Prayer, with psalms and canticles wisely chosen from the breadth of the whole tradition. There are no options to muddle over: everything is right there, including a short, gentle commentary on the equally short daily reading and a few blank lined pages for one's own responses at the end of each day. I like those blank lines: here is a tradition that not only speaks but listens.

This is a book any parish should buy by the case: it will be consolation to congregants

and powerful testimony to the unchurched that the churches have wealth to share. It also belongs in the glove compartment and in the "pastoral visit" kit of every working clergy or CPE student, because the psalms, canticles and readings are so very well chosen. The dying too are among the grieving, after all.

Wherever we do it, however we do it, we are called to feed others as we have been fed. We must invite not only the Spirit but also those who sit by the edge of the Way, blindly yearning for some bit of genuinely good news offered in a language that they already speak.