



Barbara Beshoar

Thin Places

March/April/May 2019
Year Twenty, Issue 3
Number 98

Ongoing Opportunities
Page 2

One-Time Opportunities
Page 4

Reading Opportunities
Page 6

Afterwords
Page 8

Thin Places, an ecumenical sampler of events and resources for spiritual growth, with a particular interest in the contemplative spiritual journey, is published by the Spiritual Life Community of Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Look for *Thin Places* at:
thinplaces.us or
westminstermpls.org/publications



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403-2419
612.332.3421
westminstermpls.org

Hiking with the Saints . . .

by the Rev. Matthew Johnson

*“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it...”*

Psalm 24:1

In September, I spent a couple of nights camping on Minnesota’s North Shore of Lake Superior. It was alone time, something I have come to rely on to recharge my batteries as an extroverted introvert in a people-focused calling. My neighbor had recommended hiking the Oberg Mountain Loop, so when the clouds started to break up that Friday morning, I made the short drive from Grand Marais, hoping for a lovely view of the lake and a little time to commune with God and nature.

Throughout the trail ascent, I kept encountering people with cameras, slung around their necks and shoulders and smiles spread across their faces. While most of the trees along the shore still wore their green leaves, the trees further inland and higher up were nearing peak color, a sight this romantic longs for each fall. When I reached the top of the ascent and had to decide which way to turn, a helpful soul suggested I follow the path to the right, promising the views would get better and better; either way, I would end up back in the same spot.

As I rounded the first few bends in the trail, and a beautiful vista opened before me, I saw a familiar face—a young member of the congregation I serve. The photography class he attends had made the trek up from the Twin Cities for the day to appreciate and capture the views. While I was hoping for a quieter walk, it was delightful to see him and so many others out enjoying creation and finding inspiration in God’s garden. Still, I was hoping for a moment of solitude.

A bit further along the trail, I met an older couple, resting on a bench, absorbing the view. We shared a few words and a moment of gratitude for the day, for the beauty of our surroundings, and for each other. As I continued on, for the first time, I was alone. I could see no one before me or behind me. Back under the canopy of glowing leaves, I paused, taking in the beauty that enveloped me, reminded of *Isaiah 55* and the image of trees clapping their hands and of hills and mountains breaking forth in song.

I was drawn to a tree near the trail, a maple. As I placed one hand on its trunk and then the other, holding it in an embrace, the opening words of *Psalm 24* overwhelmed me:

*“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it . . . “*

And in that moment, I marveled at the many ways we are dependent upon all that is in this earth of the Lord’s, from the obvious things like the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the people and animals with whom we share our lives, to the microbes above and below ground, even in our guts, that keep us in balance, in a state of shalom.

Yes, the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it! I looked at the leaves overhead and thought of the countless trees that spread out below the little "mountain" I was on. I thought of the roots beneath my feet. That canopy, above and below, drew me deeper into God's embrace. Then I considered the depth and breadth of the great lake that symbolizes for me the expansiveness and inclusivity of God's love.

Continuing along my path, I remembered the many times my family visited Lake Superior with my Great Aunt Hildegard. "Gardy" was like a grandmother to me; in many ways, she stood in for her sister, my maternal grandmother, who died several years before I was born. Time spent with her was always filled with laughter and love, and her steadfast faith continues to shape me.

I recollected the drive to Aunt Gardy's funeral eleven years ago. I was alone in the car on a quiet stretch of road, when an eagle swooped down and landed just off the shoulder. Though I never knew my grandmother, I was instantly reminded of a favorite scripture verse of hers, one that was read at her funeral:

*"Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint." Isaiah 40:31*

It was as though that eagle swooped down to remind me that I am not alone . . . and that my gramma and great aunt aren't either.

The earth is the Lord's. That doesn't necessarily mean everything happens for a reason or is an omen or message from the Holy One. Yet, everything is interconnected and has a part to play in God's desired shalom. That interconnectedness, I realize more and more, is what keeps drawing me back to the thin places in my life . . . and is what opens my eyes more often to see those places wherever I turn. While I prize my alone time, I am learning that reflective time often points me back to the relationships into which I am called and by which I am sustained.

As I walked back down the trail to my car, rain began to fall, offering a blessing on my short journey, one more reminder of the interconnectedness that envelopes all that is, both seen and unseen. I had found a time for solitude, for the journey in, in touch with God and nature.

And there in the woods I had also encountered the Communion of Saints, connecting with the present through smiles, an unexpected familiar face, words exchanged with resting fellow hikers—and with the past—and with that which is yet to come.

And so, the journey continues, never alone . . .

The Rev. Matt Johnson serves as Interim Associate Pastor for Families, Youth, and Children at Westminster Presbyterian Church. A second career pastor, he spent a dozen years singing with Minnesota Opera and the Minnesota Chorale while working for UnitedHealth Group. He is passionate about our call to be in relationship with God, with one another, and with all of creation.

Matt is married to Regina Johnson. Together, they enjoy ballroom dancing, traveling the world, spending time with family, and the adventure of being and becoming. He may be reached at: mjohnson@wpc-mpls.org.

Ongoing Opportunities

The Clearing

These Westminster Wednesday candle-lit contemplative services—in the quiet of The Clearing, but looking out over the lights and buses and tall buildings of downtown—invite us to encounter the beauty of gentle music and liturgy in the Celtic, Taizé and other traditions. Each service includes readings from the *Psalms* and times of prayer. At the heart of each is an experience of quiet meditation called The Great Silence, a period of six to eight minutes or more when those gathered sit in complete silence in the flickering light of the candles.

A community meal is served in the Fellowship Hall beginning at 5:15 p.m.; gathering music begins by 5:50, with the service at 6:00; The Clearing concludes by 6:30, with a time for tea and cookies and conversation.

All are welcome. Some come each week as early at 5:30 to sit in the beauty and peacefulness of the space:

Every Wednesday, 6:00-6:30 p.m.

(6:30-7:00 during Lent, beginning March 6)

also:

Westminster Town Hall Forum:

Barbara Brown Taylor,

on "Finding God in the Faith of Others"

Thursday, April 30, at noon

Gathering music begins at 11:30, reception follows

Westminster Presbyterian Church

1200 Marquette Avenue Minneapolis

(ample, free underground parking on-site)

For information: 612.322.3421 or

www.westminstermpls.org or jteliczan@wpc-mpls.org.

Ecumenical Taizé Evening Prayer

The service consists of a tiny bit of spoken prayer and Scripture, a healthy dose of silent prayer, and lots and lots of music, led by choir, soloists, piano and instrumental ensemble:

Every First Friday, through June, 7:30-8:30 p.m.
plus **Good Friday, April 19, beginning at 7:00 p.m.**
St. Richard's Catholic Church, in the Chapel
7540 Penn Ave. South, Richfield

For information about our Taizé Prayer or other up-coming opportunities: 612.869.2426 or www.strichards.com or bsullivan@strichards.com.

Sundays@10

Multiple opportunities for spiritual formation, including

- **Meditation**, every week, in the Chapel
- **Sunday Forum**, various topics, e.g., for March 3: "The power of naming and storytelling," in the Jackman Room:

Every Sunday, 10:00-10:45 a.m., through May
Plymouth Congregational Church

1900 Nicollet Avenue (at Franklin), Minneapolis
For information: 612.871.7400 or churchinfo@plymouth.org or www.plymourh.org/explore/adult-spirituality.

Celtic Contemplative Communion

Pilgrim Lutheran has been invited to bring its long-running monthly "Celtic Contemplative Communion" service (**Second Sundays, 6:51 p.m.**) to Holden Village this coming summer.

To help this happen, **the instrumental ensemble**—Northumbrian small pipes, Highland Great and Real pipes, Cello and more—that has long led the music at these services will offer its first ever concert.

"The ethereal instrumentation, and the wistful words of poetry woven throughout, create a sonic texture that is evocative, peaceful, focused and lively":

Sunday, March 3, 6:51 p.m.

Pilgrim Lutheran Church, 1935 St. Clair Ave., St. Paul

For information on the ensemble or this concert: www.dicksold.com or 651.646.6581—for tickets to it: www.brownpapertickets.com—for information about other up-coming opportunities: 651.699.6886 or www.pilgrimstpaul.org.

Sacred Space: Come. Be. God.

Many have found this annual opportunity to be very special. When you arrive at Grace Trinity, you'll be given a portable audio player to use during your time in Sacred Space (much like a museum tour). As you move through the Walk, each station will offer a meditative practice or prayer and time to reflect . . . on your life, on your relationships, the world, and God's love. There's no need to sign up in advance, and all are welcome!

With its personal audio device, **Sacred Space** may be especially helpful for those who have never walked

a labyrinth. Just bring yourself . . . and be gently guided into a quiet, meditative experience:

Monday-Thursday, March 4-7, 4:00-9:00 p.m.

(with evening snacks, 5:30-7:30 p.m.)

Grace-Trinity Community Church

1430 West 28th Street, Minneapolis

For info: 612.872.8266 or www.gracetrinitychurch.org or daniel@gracetrinitychurch.org.

Introduction to Centering Prayer

Except for four times—when Christmas fell on a Saturday—the St. Olaf Centering Prayer group has met every week for more than twenty-five years (**Every Saturday, 9:15-11:15 a.m.**), with some founding members still active.

The group is offering an Introduction to Centering Prayer in four parts—"Prayer as Relationship," "The Method of Centering Prayer," "Thoughts and the Use of the Sacred Word," & "Deepening Our Relationship with God"—over two days. Each day will also offer the experience of Centering Prayer. All are welcome.

Come if you have been curious—come if you would like to be refreshed, within this long-practicing group:

Two Saturdays, March 23 and 30, 9:00-11:30 a.m.

St. Olaf Catholic Church

215 South 8th Street, Minneapolis

For additional information: carolquest@q.com.

Women of Wisdom: Women in Community

Come and explore stories of women in the Christian tradition whose lives demonstrate the unity and diversity of community. What unites their challenging and seemingly disparate stories is how these women support each other in life and in death. Each session will include readings, input, conversation, and ritual.

Mary Oliver

Mary Oliver, American poet and Pulitzer Prize winner, died in her home on January 17 at eighty-three. While reading her, the thought often came, "She gets it!" And then the realization, "No, Mary Oliver helps me get it."

". . . I don't know exactly what prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, which is what I have been doing all day. Tell me, what else should I have done?"

from "The Summer Day"

This series will include discussions of Mary and Elizabeth, and Joan of Arc, as well as a screening of the documentary *The Burning Times*, which examines many women through the centuries who were considered a threat to the political or religious climate of their time, and lost their lives because of it:

Three Thursdays, May 16, 23, and 30, 6:30-8:30 p.m.

Wisdom Ways Center for Spirituality

Carondelet Center, 1890 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul

For information about these and many other up-coming opportunities—like **Backs Against the Wall: the Howard Thurman Story** (April 12) and **More Together than Alone** (April 26): www.wisdomwayscenter.org or 651.696.2788 or rdobias@wisdomwayscenter.org.

One-Time Opportunities

Enneagram Retreat

It seems that there is always a level beneath the obvious that affects how we see, what we see, what we don't see, and our preconscious and emotional reactions. The enneagram—which has been traced by some back to the Desert Fathers and Mothers—is a way to deepen self-understanding through the Enneagram's nine personality types, enhancing your spiritual life and relationships. The retreat includes presentations, individual reflections and group discussions. The modest cost includes lunch and materials.

Don't miss this opportunity!:

Saturday, March 16, 8:30 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

Central Lutheran Church, 333 South 12th Street,

in downtown Minneapolis, with on-site parking

For information and registration: 612-870-4416 or receptionist@centralmpls.org or www.centralmpls.org.

Contemplative Outreach's Annual United in Prayer Day

People in thousands of places around the world join

together each year for a "United in Prayer Day." In honor of Fr. Thomas Keating, this year's theme will be all about celebration: celebrating the gifts of the Spiritual Journey, the gift of Fr. Thomas, and the gifts of Centering Prayer. For various ways to be a part of this celebration, check www.contemplativeoutreach.org.

Those **in the Twin Cities area** can join the world-wide community by coming to a local free gathering, for centering prayer, for the video from Father Thomas, and to enjoy being in community at a noontime lunch. Please RSVP to

Klindstrom@usfamily.net—or if you can, just come (holding up the parable of loaves and fishes) ☺:

Saturday March 16, 9:30 a.m.-1:00 p.m.

Salem Lutheran Church, 11 Bernard St W., St. Paul

also

Centering Prayer Spring Enrichment

We'll explore five "Wisdom Energies" that can bring out the best of who we are and allow seeing the world with new eyes:

Saturday, April 13, 8:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.

Sponsored by **Minnesota Contemplative Outreach**

Held at **St. Paul's Monastery, 2675 Benet Road, St. Paul**

To register or for more information:

<https://www.minnesotacontemplativeoutreach.org>.

A Private Retreat at St Paul's Monastery

Consider scheduling a retreat just for yourself, some time away for what seems best, time to read, relax, write, pray, walk the grounds, join the Sisters for Prayer and for meals—whatever would work for you:

- **A Quiet Retreat** (1 night) gives you one night away from responsibilities. The room and three home-cooked meals are prepared with a personal touch. You are welcome but not obligated to join the Sisters for morning (8:00 a.m.), midday (11:30 a.m.), or evening (5:00 p.m.) Prayer. Take in the art, read, or walk the labyrinth as you choose. The time is yours. Some guests at any of our private retreats find it helpful to meet with a spiritual director while here.
- **A Peace Retreat** (2 nights) helps you settle in to the calm that greets you at the monastery doors. Day 1 helps you familiarize yourself with the beauty and resources. Day 2 allows you the freedom to linger without travel. Day 3 allows you to ease back into normal life. The Peace Retreat helps you feel at home.
- Often people who are feeling called to integrate the disciplines of silence and spiritual practice into their lives choose **A Sustaining Practice Retreat** (3 to 7 nights). Such a retreat invites a person to set aside a significant window of time (between 3 and 7 nights) for

Contact Us

Do you know of anyone—it's free to all who ask—who would like to receive this ecumenical newsletter?

If you do, please contact Kristin Kieft at news@wpc-mpls.org or 612.332.3421.

If you know of an up-coming Opportunity that would be of interest to other readers, or if you have any other questions or comments, please contact us at: thinplaces_us@msn.com

renewal and growth. One can explore the riches of solitude while benefiting from the rhythm of monastic life and the support of experienced companions. The Sisters pray daily, and the Benedictine Center staff is ready to guide and assist. You are not alone. Most guests find it helpful to meet daily with a spiritual director while here:

Flexible dates

The Benedictine Center, St. Paul's Monastery
2675 Benet Road, St. Paul

For information or registration for this and other up-coming opportunities—like **Seeking the Way of Beauty** (April 5-6) or the **Hermitage Retreat** (April 26-28): benedictinecenter@stpaulsmonastery.org or 651.777.7251 or www.stpaulsmonastery.org.

Praying with Bread

There is a God given rhythm to life which must be honored. It is like bread making, which has a rhythm of work and rest. It is at the heart of our spiritual lives, action, and solitude. This is a hands-on bread making class interspersed with time for the Spirit to rise within through contemplative prayer:

Saturday, March 30, 9:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.

Christos Center for Spiritual Formation

1212 Holly Drive, Lino Lakes, MN

For information about this and other up-coming opportunities in the Twin Cities—like **Lenten Quiet** (March 2) and **Soul Collage** (March 23): 651.653.8207 or ladonna@christoscenter.org or www.christoscenter.org For Chicago events: donnascott@christoscenter.org or 630.868.9425.

Conscious Eldering Workshop

This workshop provides an opportunity for participants to gain both a conceptual understanding of a paradigm for aging and an experiential understanding of the types of inner work that are important on this path.

The weekend consists of presentations, deep group sharing, ritual, ceremony and reflective practices:

Friday, April 26, at 2:00 p.m.-Sun., April 28, at 4:00 p.m.

Spirituality Center, Saint Benedict's Monastery

104 Chapel Lane, St. Joseph, MN

For information or registration for these and other up-coming opportunities—like **Celebrating Lent with the Gospels: An Ash Wednesday Retreat** (March 6) and **A Journey of Three Days: a Triduum Retreat** (April 18-21): 320-363-7112 or www.sbm.osb.org or spiritualitycenter@csbsju.edu.

"I Can Hardly Wait to Grow Old!"

Together, we will explore the spirituality of aging—the

practice of finding God in all things. Together, we will reflect upon ourselves and our life experiences, on:

- Letting go
- Forgiveness and compassion for self and others
- Gratitude regardless of external circumstances
- Embracing diminishment and limitation
- Finding role models for aging fully alive
- Uncovering the gifts that come with growing old

Together, we will create and experience a daily practice of gratitude:

Saturday, May 4, 9:00-11:00 a.m.

Loyola Spirituality Center

389 North Oxford Street, St. Paul

For information or registration for other up-coming opportunities—like **Spirituality of the Second Half of Life** (March 23) and **Simple Prayer** (May 11): 651.641.0008 or loyolassr@comcast.net or www.loyolaspiritualitycenter.org.

"Away Grief's Grasping and Joyless Days"

This will be a time for presentations, personal prayer, and reflection drawing upon Chapters 20 and 21 in John's Gospel and poetry by Gerald Manley Hopkins.

These days together will not be spent in poetry criticism nor self-criticism but in prayfully receiving and enjoying Easter Resurrection in our own lives:

Friday, May 10, at 8:00 p.m.-Sun., May 12, at 12:45

Christ the King Retreat Center, Buffalo, MN

For information or registration for this or other up-coming opportunities—like **The Spirit Renews the Church** (March 15-17) and **Valuing and Nurturing Relationships across Generations** (May 11): 763.682.1394 or jpolman@kingshouse.com or www.kingshouse.com.

Justice and Peace Stations of the Cross

An annual tradition, this form of the Way of the Cross is a silent prayer walk, from the heart of La Crosse to the Mississippi River.

Ferretting out God's track

"Nature's intent is neither food, nor drink, nor clothing, nor comfort, nor anything else in which God is left out.

Whether you like it or not, whether you know it or not, secretly nature seeks, hunts, tries to ferret out the track on which God may be found. . . ."

from *Meister Eckhart, from Whom God Hid Nothing: Sermons, Writings, and Sayings*

Along the way, we stop to pray and sing at places that represent suffering in our community and world today. The two-mile walk recalls the journey of Jesus as he carried his cross to Calvary. Adults, students and families are all welcome to experience this special Good Friday event. Please dress according to the weather:

Good Friday, April 19, at 10:00 a.m.

—gather at the Center’s front entrance—

Franciscan Spirituality Center

920 Market Street, La Crosse WI

For information or registration for up-coming opportunities like this and for groups that meet here regularly—like **The Sound of Bowls** and **Conversations That Matter** and (coming in September) **Finding God in All Things: the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in Daily Life**: www.fscenter.org or 608.791.5295 or fscenter@fspa.org.

“A Darkness all of Light”

This line from a poem by Franz Wright serves to focus our days dedicated to the practice of contemplation, conference, discussion, and silent table fellowship.

Silence itself has no opposite. For the silent mind, sound is as silent as no sound. For the decluttered mind, despair and delight manifest the very same silence we incessantly bodyforth by the simple fact that we are. But for the cluttered mind, such things seem to be at odds. In this retreat we will consider such challenges, among others:

Thursday, May 23 , with supper (registration, 3:00-5:00 p.m.) - **Tuesday, May 28, at noon**

The Episcopal House of Prayer, Collegeville, MN

For information or registration for this and other up-coming opportunities in Collegeville—like **Voice, Body, and Heart/Mind: Doors of Awareness** (April 12-13) and **Cynthia Bourgeault: Humility Reconsidered** (June 7-9, wait list only) 320.363.3293 or houseprayer@csbsju.edu or www.ehouseofprayer.org —or for **The House of Prayer in the City**: www.ehouseofprayer.org/hopc.

“ . . . no expectations, only an invitation . . . ”

"Our world is so full of conditions, demands, requirements, and obligations that we often wonder what is expected of us.

But when we meet a truly free person,
a truly giving person,
there are no expectations, only an invitation
to reach into ourselves
and discover there our own freedom."

Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*

Wine & Wit: An Evening with Kevin Kling

As many know, for the last eighteen years City House has offered spiritual listening to people in our community who are on the margins, to people who are generally unseen and unheard, to people outside the normal paths to spiritual direction.

“Wine & Wit” is an opportunity for wine tasting and Kevin Kling all on the same evening, . . . an opportunity to learn more about City House, and even a chance to make a modest contribution to this important and caring ministry:

Thursday, May 30, 5:30-7:30 p.m.

Sponsored by **City House**

Held at **Westminster Presbyterian Church**

1200 Marquette Avenue Minneapolis

(ample, free underground parking on-site)

For information or registration: www.city-house.org or rolf@city-house.org .

Reading Opportunities

just this, by **richard roh** [<https://store.cac.org>]

This small (even tiny, at 4” x 6”) book seems to pack more punch per page than perhaps any other of Fr. Richard’s many books. It distills the understanding he’s gained from his own long contemplative journey and much of what he has learned from his many years as spiritual director, retreat leader and teacher. The path that is pointed out is one of deep re-orientation, of seeking to set aside our familiar ways of thinking and labeling and judging, of undertaking “lifestyle practices and prompts” that can fundamentally reset our mind and heart. The path attracts, but the punches punch.

Fr. Richard’s “Introduction” begins with words from Scripture:

“I am ready to be approached by those who do not study me, ready to be found by those who do not seek me. I say, ‘I am here, I am here,’ to people who do not even invoke my name”. *Isaiah 65:1*

And then sets forth its basic premise:

“Perhaps more than anything else, **just this** is a book about seeing, but a kind of seeing that is much more than mere looking because it includes *recognizing* and thus *appreciating*. This is the kind of seeing we do in contemplation, the centerpiece of any authentic inner dialogue. The contemplative mind does not tell us *what* to see, but teaches us how to see what we behold.

Contemplation . . . is a mental discipline and gift that detaches us, even neurologically, from our habitual way of thinking and from our left brain, which likes to think it is in control. . . .”

This new/old contemplative way of seeing and living is “a long loving look” at what is, an openness that can lead to a moment [some might call it a thin place] that engenders “awe . . . and surrendering to it”:

“To let the moment teach us, we must allow ourselves to be at least slightly *stunned* by it until it draws us inward and upward, toward a subtle experience of wonder. To get us started, we normally need a single moment of gratuitous awe—and such moments are the only solid foundation for the entire religious instinct and journey.”

In the first three chapters, Fr. Richard goes on to explain, flesh-out, and support his understanding of the contemplative, with sections on “a moment of awe,” “a long, loving look,” “the sacrament of the present moment,” “making space for more,” “thoughts versus awareness,” “at-one-ment,” and much more.

And then, in the final chapter, he offers,

“Twelve lifestyle practices and prompts that have the potential to break us into deeper consciousness, to reset our mind and heart, and to allow every day to become another encounter with the ‘just this’ of every moment, . . . [practices that] can lead to what basketball players, dancers, and musicians call ‘muscle memory,’ that is the cultivation of new automatic responses and actions [that nourish this new way of seeing]. . . .”

The first practice offered is “beholding.” In two and a half packed pages, he offers a way to push aside familiar habits and to experience a rich and deep new way of seeing, and of living:

“Have you ever noticed how many of the apparitions in the Bible begin with ‘behold’—a command, an invitation, or perhaps a call to a different style of attention . . .

Someone who is truly beholding [has] begun to meet reality subject to subject instead of subject to object, I and thou instead of just I and it . . .

Beholding happens when you stop trying to ‘hold’ and allow yourself to ‘be held’ by the other . . .

It’s not “a kind of emptiness within . . .”

“The road to contemplation is not one of achieving inner silence at all costs by following some technique that creates a kind of emptiness within.

If, instead, with a childlike trust, we let Christ pray silently within us, then one day we shall discover that the depths of our being are inhabited by a Presence.”

Brother Roger of Taizé, *Prayer for Each Day*

To behold is to allow and to taste the awe and wonder we have been talking about throughout this book . . .”

More concretely, the practice itself,

“I want you to walk into some new areas today and ‘behold’ some things! Look at a tree, for example, until you see it in its ‘absolute truth’ as one instance of the eternal self-emptying of God into creation. When you behold the tree in this way, you move beyond its mere ‘relative truth’ as either a beech or an elm, big or small, useful or useless, healthy or dying, yours or not yours, hard wood or soft wood. You are allowing the tree to reveal its inherent dignity, as it is, without your interference or your labels. It becomes an epiphany, and the walls of your world begin to expand.”

Then, eleven more.

The path towards re-setting attracts deeply. Seeking to be on it may be all we can do, and enough. The promptings in this small book can help open us to moments of awe . . . and to surrendering to them. . . .

Afterwords: continued from back page.

Caution. Any description (like this) in words and thoughts of the silence of contemplative prayer is not only personal but also just a matter of hinting at it (and it gets harder the further you go). In *1 Kings*, Elijah is guided to a cave on Mount Horeb and told to be ready because the Lord is about to pass by. Suddenly outside there’s a mighty wind and then a terrible earthquake and then an all-consuming fire. And then, only after wind and earthquake and fire, does God appear, in the **“the sound of sheer silence.”**

Twice recently—at the Twentieth Anniversary service on October 3 and at the Wednesday Evening Contemplative Service on December 12—a somewhat Elijah-like experience has come, an experience (in a phrase seen somewhere) of “being fully open to the Other.” And once, an even deeper experience has come, an experience of seeming to be fully a part of the Other, or perhaps of there being no Other, or perhaps a deep sense of Oneness. . . .

Sorry, this has gone on and is perhaps too much looking in. But those sound-of-sheer-silence experiences—if that is what they were—seemed like they needed something said about them. Thank you for listening.



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403-2419

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 3280
Twin Cities, MN

Address Service Requested

*“Hiking with the Saints . . .”
“Praying with Bread . . .”
“the experience of silence . . .”*

Afterwords: the experience of silence . . .

A powerful experience during the Great Silence—coming twice in recent months at contemplative services at Westminster—has led to thinking about the experience of silence, to remembering the daily silences of centering prayer and the greater silences of retreats and times in a hermitage. . . .

Intentionally seeking silence is a form of prayer, a way of being in prayer without the use of words and thoughts. Like all forms of prayer, what comes is always a gift. And what comes has varied widely from time to time (as it may also from person to person).

Remembering . . . it seems that when we first enter, it is mostly a matter of quieting. We do not even try to turn off the words and thoughts and opinions that continuously stream through our minds. And we do not seek to block out the sounds around us, be they the human-made noises of the city or the gentler natural sounds of the countryside. Instead, we gently withdraw our attention from them, aware of them being there (“like boats floating by out on the river,” as Thomas Keating sometimes said), but pushing them off when needed with our sacred word.

This is not easy, with our minds so used to being on deck and liking to be in control. But it seems to become easier with time and, more essentially, with patience to allow it to happen rather than trying to make it happen. And when it does, it seems like we are entering a place of peace and quiet. In daily centering prayer (at least for one), this is often as far as one goes, and it is a perfectly good place to be, as the day begins or ends. But sometimes the silence goes beyond quieting to a place where the boats no longer float by, and where there is a sense of emptying and receptivity. In the well-known words of Anthony De Mello, **“Silence is not the absence of sound, but the absence of self.”**

“The absence of self” seems right, as far as it goes, but this emptying seems often to lead to a deeper place of receptivity, to a place beyond absence, to a place of awakening, of opening to a broader, non-dual reality. The author of this issue’s Meditation, in leading worship, sometimes ends a spoken prayer by inviting us into **“the roominess of silence”** . . . a profoundly centered place and, at least for one, about as deep as the experience goes.