Thirty-five years ago, while a student in Contemplative Psychotherapy at the Naropa University, my entire cohort of thirty-two students went on retreat together for ten weeks. In today’s hyper‐busy world, where it is hard to get people together for an overnight, such an event is almost unimaginable. We spent our time away studying and practicing a set of teachings called the Five Elements, or the Five Wisdom Teachings. Born out of Chinese Five Element theory, these are a set of contemplative practices that are a wholistic way of examining wisdom and neurosis from the perspective of the constituent elements of reality, or what Christians would call the attributes of God.

For me these teachings, and this experience, were profoundly transformative. They brought together my interests in contemplation, the environment, and healing in a new way that made sense to me at the core of my being. Years later, when I read the Biblical Wisdom tradition, I also recognized this wholistic approach to spirituality, life, and our relationship to the entire world.

As I have gotten older, I experience the truth of the teaching that nothing is lost. Rather, everything we do continues to be a part of ourselves, informing how our life moves forward. So, I was not too surprised when, three years ago, I found myself with a great desire to bring these teachings on the Elements into the center of my work. I know that this desire is related to the current state of the earth.

From the time I was very young, I’ve always had a profound connection to the non‐human natural world. I loved being in ‘nature’ as a child and always wanted to be in the woods, the desert, the mountains; all of these places spoke to me in deep ways. To this day, I can remember such places and moments with total clarity, and these memories are accompanied by feelings of utter joy and peace.

As I grew, I was also moved and motivated by the environmental movements of the late 20th Century. It was clear that our industrial production mode of existence was destructive and wrong on a very primordial level. I remember how sad I felt when I first saw a clear‐cut forest, and this past memory collided with the present when—just a few weeks ago, in a book on Native Theology—I read, “There is no ceremony, in any tradition, for clear‐cutting an entire forest.”

The environmental crisis we now face is many times greater than it was when I was a child, and I can feel the groaning of the earth as it labors under the burden of our way of being. And increasingly, many others with whom I talk are also experiencing what I can only describe as environmental anxiety. It’s like the planet is now talking to us inside our heads, telling us that a great change is coming. What do we need in such a time as this?
Perhaps my favorite passage of scripture (at the beginning of Proverbs 9) offers an answer, or at least the start of an answer to this last question. This is the great image of Wisdom creating a house, built on Seven Pillars, to which people are invited to come and eat and learn together:

“Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still; teach the righteous, and they will gain in learning. Lay aside foolishness and live, walk in the way of insight.”

The Five Wisdoms that I first heard about so many years ago still seem to me to offer a fruitful and perhaps even transformative “walk in the way of insight,” both in our Caring for Creation and in our living wholistic, healing lives. And so, I will close with a few of the thoughts and questions that stick with me today:

The Element of Space is the element that holds all, the total environment. In the Christian world we would talk of this as God. And so, I wonder about how we individually connect with this total environment? How do we treat our bodies, our homes, our communities? I think about the environment of the planet and how we relate to that space. And I meditate on the Wisdom that is inherent in vast spaciousness: no matter what the form, the birth or the ground only to get a huge harvest. With such abundance why do so many people feel a lack, an emptiness in their lives? Why do we teach people that they are not enough: not good enough, wise enough, pretty enough? Yet God is pure abundance.

The Element of Air is the element of wise action, the power to do what is needed with compassion and energy. Yet why then do we waste so much time acting on what is frivolous? Why is it so easy to make small talk and so hard to meditate?

The Element of Fire is the element of loving relationship. We are warmed by the gentle fires of compassion and love and the universe itself is full of endless burning fires that light the sky. We are drawn to loving relationship and yet we also struggle to be in compassionate relationships with other people. At what point will the knowledge of eternal lovingness overcome our fear of oblivion?

Blessings to you all on your elemental journeys.

Peace, Dan

Daniel Wolpert, a healer and student of the spiritual life, has taught and led retreats in the fields of psychology, integrative medicine, and spiritual formation in numerous settings over the past 30 years. Co-founder and Executive Director of the Minnesota Institute of Contemplation and Healing, a Spiritual Director, and Presbyterian pastor, he is also the author of several books and multiple articles on spiritual life, leadership, and healing. Dan loves the outdoors and being with his adult children. You know he’s from Los Angeles because you can always find him at the movies. He may be reached at micahprays@midco.net.

Ongoing Opportunities

The New Ministry Lab at United Theological Seminary

Many remember that the Resource Center for Churches —located at the Church Center on Franklin Avenue in south Minneapolis, which served so many for so many years so well—closed its doors last May. But the closure was temporary and transformative, and United Seminary’s new Ministry Lab offers much of what was available through the Resource Center, and more.

Of particular interest to Thin Places readers might be the fact that the Ministry Lab’s very first workshop was Preparing Contemplative Worship, in which participants—current leaders and those considering offering contemplative worship—were invited to share their “expertise and experience; their questions and conundrums about how to weave it together; and their joy in contemplative practices.”

Thin Places readers may also be interested in the upcoming two-event “Spring Sprout,” at which participants will share an Introductory Contemplative Practice Session, preview progressive worship planning materials and curricula for all ages, and connect with
others engaging in innovative ministries.

All are invited. Come to see some of what we are about . . . and to meet others:

**Two Tuesdays, March 10 and May 12, 2:00-5:00 p.m.**
**United Theological Seminary, in the Chapel**
**767 Eustis Street, Suite 140, St. Paul**
For information or registration for these two sessions, for more information about other upcoming opportunities, or about the many other resources available through the Ministry Lab: 651.894.2927 or ministrylab@unitedseminary.edu or www.unitedseminary.edu.

**Christian Contemplative Prayer**
Offered at three times/places in the Twin Cities and Collegeville. Each evening prayer usually begins with a simple chant, followed by a twenty-minute silence, a meditative walk, and a second sit. All are welcome. You are invited to arrive a bit early so we can greet you and introduce you to the practice and space:
- **Mondays, 6:30-7:30 p.m., at St. Paul’s Church on Lake of the Isles, 1917 Logan Ave., Minneapolis**
- **Wednesdays, 5:30-6:30 p.m., at the Episcopal House of Prayer, 14215 Fruit Farm Road, Collegeville**
- **Thursdays, 6:30-7:30 p.m., at Episcopal Homes, Drew Room, 502 Lynnhurst Ave. E., St. Paul**
Offered by **The Episcopal House of Prayer and The House of Prayer in the City**
For information about these and other up-coming opportunities, like—**The Embodied Spirit**, March 19-22, or **Re-Creating a Life**, May 15-17—320.363.3293 or houseprayer@csbsju.edu or www.ehouseofprayer.org or www.ehouseofprayer.org/hopc.

**Taizé Evening Prayer**
In the sacred space of contemplative silence, God often touches us deeply, and healing and transformation happen. This unique style of prayer originated at the ecumenical community in Taizé, France, and has spread around the globe. All are invited to join us:

**First Thursdays, 6:00-7:00 p.m.**
**Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Sacred Heart Chapel**
**1168th Avenue SE, Little Falls, MN**
For information about these and other up-coming opportunities: 320.632.0688 or www.fslf.org or franciscanlife@fslf.org.

**An Appreciation** *(first found in Westminster News)*
Westminster’s Wednesday evening contemplative services—called “Silence and Song”—have become high points of the week for us. There’s a simple, unifying wholeness to the chosen Words from Scripture, the spoken prayers, and the music. And the singing especially seems to draw us together—as those there blend their voices with that of Amanda Weber, the Minister of Music and the Arts, in songs and sung prayers . . . taking us a little way out of ourselves and our daily lives . . . forming us into a worshipping community, here in the heart of the city.

And building upon this, the Great Silence begins with us sitting together, opening ourselves to the quiet. And sometimes it goes deeper. Richard Rohr says that “foundational silence is liberating and calming, . . . a deep, interior openness to Presence.” Matthew Johnson, after the Sunday morning formal Prayer of Confession, sometimes invited us into “the roominess of silence.” And for Anthony de Mello, “Silence is not the absence of sound . . . but the absence of self . . . “

This deeper, peace-giving silence is not always experienced. But the sense of people having gathered here intentionally, the sound of the familiar Words and the blended voices, and the surrounding beauty of the space, all seem to nurture its coming.

Wednesday evening “Song and Silence” is a high point. We just come, and a deep experience of worship opens to us. Deep thanks to those who make it happen: Wednesdays, 6:00-6:30 p.m., in The Clearing Westminster Presbyterian Church
**1200 Marquette Avenue Minneapolis**
(ample free parking beneath the new building)
For information: 612.322.3421 or www.westminstermpls.org or jteliczan@wpc-mpls.org.

**A link to:**
“Richard Rohr Reorders the Universe,”
*The New Yorker*, 2 February 2020

**Join Six Faith Communities for Taizé Evening Prayer**
A simple supper at 6:00 p.m., followed by the area’s
most intentionally ecumenical Taize Prayer at 7:00 p.m.:
Thursday, March 26, St. Frances Cabrini Catholic Church, 1500 Franklin Avenue SE, Minneapolis
Thursday, May 7, Faith Mennonite Church, 2720 East 22nd Street, Minneapolis
For information: 612.339.3023, ext. 115 or chris@cabrini.org or www.cabrinimn.org.

One-Time Opportunities

The Wisdom Way of Jesus
Have you ever really looked at the weather map when the local news is on the TV? With its local focus, it almost seems that the weather doesn’t exist in Iowa or Wisconsin, exists only in Minnesota.

In a sense, we make a similar limiting assumption when we think of Christianity, presuming that the Christian experience is similar to that of our western way of thinking and being.

Join us as we meet Yeshua from a new perspective and see the beautiful tradition of Jewish-Christian mysticism and contemplative practices:
Saturday, March 7, 9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.
Christos Center for Spiritual Formation
1212 Holly Drive, Lino Lakes, MN
For information or registration for this or other upcoming opportunities, like—Contemplative Pause, THINPLACES.US 4 weekly on Wednesdays, 9:45 a.m. to noon—651.653.8207 or kathryn@christoscenter.org or www.christoscenter.org.

Wisdom of the Mystics: A Lenten Retreat
The season of Lent invites us to slow down, quiet ourselves, and “return to God with all our hearts.” What can we learn from the mystics in this season of spiritual renewal? What prayer practices can help us tune into the still, small voice within? Come share the wisdom of classical giants such as Meister Eckhart, St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Teresa of Avila, as well as more contemporary mystics including Dorothy Day, Dag Hammarskjold, Pierre de Chardin and Thomas Merton.

Listen as we share their stories—and spend time reflecting on our own—as we journey toward the Resurrection:
Sunday, March 8, at 6:30 p.m.-
Saturday, March 14 at 10:00 a.m.
Franciscan Spirituality Center
920 Market Street, La Crosse WI
For information or registration for this or other upcoming opportunities, like—Claiming Your Power: Finding Compassion after Trauma, March 27-28, or Serenity Retreat: Practice these Principles in All Our Affairs, April 3-5—608.791.5295 or fscenter@fsp.org or www.fscenter.org.

Ordinary Miracles: Writing our Book of Delights,

I and Thou
In his classic book, I and Thou, the philosopher Martin Buber spoke of two ways to engage with the world.

He said that modern society emphasizes and values the "I-it" way . . . where every creature—including other humans and even the earth itself—is an object or collection of qualities and quantities to be experienced, sought, known, and put to some purpose.

To frame our relationships with things, with others, with the earth in terms of "I-thou" instead of "I-it" means to move from experience to fully engaged encounter. Beyond language, beyond theology or science, beyond answers is a sacred space where I and thou can meet.

And it is only in shaping our relationships into encounters with mystery—rather than in seeing them as something tangible for us to grasp—that we may sometimes discover ourselves in the presence of the Eternal Thou.

Attempted paraphrase of Martin Buber’s thesis in his, I and Thou

An “Encounter,” instead of an “Experience”

“When I am among the trees, especially the willows and the honey locust, equally the beech, the oaks, and the pines, they give off such hints of gladness.

I am so distant from the hope of myself, in which I have goodness, and discernment, and never hurry through the world but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me, the trees stir in their leaves and call out, ‘Stay awhile.’

The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, ‘It’s simple,’ they say, ‘and you too have come into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine.’”

Mary Oliver, “When I Am Among the Trees”
Every day for a year, poet Ross Gay looked for, found, and then recorded a moment of ordinary delight—a chance meeting, an act of kindness, a flash of beauty. He collected his reflections in *The Book of Delights*.

For three weeks, we will do the same, every day capturing in words an ordinary delight to share with each other and then to compile in our own Book of Delights. Writers of all kinds, with all levels of experience, are welcome to this special experience:

**Mondays, March 16, 23, 30, 6:30-8:30 p.m.**

**Spirituality Center, Saint Benedict’s Monastery**
104 Chapel Lane, St. Joseph, MN

For information or registration for this and other upcoming opportunities, like—**Raising Questions, Speaking Truth**, Thursdays, March 5, 19, April 2, 6:30-8:30 p.m., or **Sacred Pause Lenten Prayer**, Lenten Thursdays, Feb. 27, March 5, 12, 19, 26, April 2, 11:30 a.m.-12:45 p.m.—320-363-7112 or www.sbm.osb.org or mholicky@csbsju.edu or eantony@csbsju.edu.

**Second Triennial Spirit and Breath: A Holotropic Breathwork Retreat**

Holotropic Breathwork is a powerful method of self-exploration that uses a combination of seemingly simple means—accelerated breathing, evocative music, and a type of bodywork that helps to release residual bioenergetic and emotional blocks. Fr. K.C. Thomas, SBD, returns to Minnesota to offer this unique and powerful healing retreat every two to three years.

The unique feature of Holotropic Breathwork is that it utilizes the intrinsic healing potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness. Indigenous civilizations and ancient cultures have always held meta-ordinary states of consciousness in high esteem for their remarkable healing power.

This four-day immersion retreat is designed for those who want to experience meta-ordinary states of consciousness in a safe and sacred space where a learning ecosystem is fostered, so that individuals may learn to navigate the inner scrapes of challenging life situations and concurrent peri-natal, biographical, transpersonal experiences:

**Monday, March 16, at 4:00 p.m.- Friday, March 20, at 10:30 a.m.**

**Clearwater Forest Retreat Center, Deerwood, MN**

**Leaning Tree Lodge** (www.clearwaterforest.org)

Organized by The Rev. Dr. Matthew Cobb, former Director of The Episcopal House of Prayer, and The Rev. K.C. Thomas, SDB, who is Director of Bosco Institute of Psychology and Spirituality

For additional details and registration: cobb@walksback.com or 785.844.0285.

**Contemplative Outreach’s Annual United in Prayer Day**

People—in thousands of places around the world—join together each year for this unified and unifying Day of Prayer. For various ways to become a part of this celebration: www.contemplativeoutreach.org/2020-united-prayer-day.

Those in the Twin Cities area will have two opportunities to take part, in community:

**Saturday March 21, 9:00-11:30 a.m.**

**St. Olaf Catholic Church, 215 S. 8th Street, Minneapolis**

For information: carolquest@q.com

and

**Saturday March 21, 9:15 a.m.-1:00 p.m., includes lunch**

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

For information: klindstrom@usfamily.net. Both are sponsored by Minnesota Contemplative Outreach.

**12 Step based Spiritual Retreats**

Richard Rohr believes that 12 Step is the most important spiritual practice developed in America, and The Retreat has a long and caring record of providing support for those in a 12 Step program who especially want to explore and deepen their spirituality.

Specific topics in our week-end retreats vary from month to month, but attendees at all of them will experience:

- an opportunity to pull back from the pull of the daily distractions in our lives
- connection and community with others on this spiritual path, including group discussion
- time for reflection and contemplation
- nourishment, with meals prepared by our award-winning chef

“**It isn’t so much an IT as a THOU . . . ”**

“It is becoming more and more clear to me that silence isn’t an emptiness. It isn’t so much an IT as a THOU. Let’s see if we can deepen our own life of prayer by moving beyond thinking that silence is an emptiness, a backdrop or a condition, into thinking and actually experiencing silence as a mode of relationship with the infinitely present Beloved.”

Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*
Here are the next three retreat opportunities:

**Friday, March 27, at 4:30 p.m.-Sun., March 29, at 1:00 p.m.**
**Detoxing the Spirit**

**Friday, April 24, at 4:30 p.m.-Sun., Apr. 26, at 1:00 p.m.**
**Relationships as a Spiritual Practice**

**Friday, May 29, at 4:30 p.m.-Sun., May 31, at 1:00 p.m.**
**Serenity for the Second Half of Life**

The Retreat, 1221 Wayzata Blvd. East, Wayzata
For detailed information or registration for these or other upcoming opportunities: www.theretreat.org or 952.476.0566 or cnehotte@theretreat.org.

**Mothers, Grandmothers, Daughters, Sisters, Friends: “The Friendship of Women”**

This retreat day offers an opportunity to reflect on the friendships of women and the qualities that sustain them. We will consider what we learn from the women of Scripture, from more modern-day women, and from our own experiences about the way God has created us for relationship. The day will include time for individual reflection and sharing:

**Saturday, March 28, 9:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.**
Christ the King Retreat Center, Buffalo, MN
For information or registration for this or other upcoming opportunities, like—**Lenten Day of Centering Prayer and Lectio Divina**, March 4, or **Men and Women’s Silent Retreat**, May 8-10—763.682.1394 or jpolman@kingshouse.com or www.kingshouse.com.

**The Moral Imagination of Self-Compassion: Coming Home to Our Bodily Selves in this World**

This three-part series speaks from and to the importance of navigating the flow of emotions in and among us; acknowledges the formidable impact of colonized bodies; draws upon traditions of contemplation and movement in the practice of being present to our bodily selves; plays with sacred and ordinary stories of compassion; engages in self-reflective activities; and trusts in the work of the Spirit to enliven our time together.

**My Grandmother’s Hands** will ground our conversations even as it will continue to be a resource for you:

**Thursdays, April 2, 16, 30, 6:30-8:30 p.m.**
Wisdom Ways Center for Spirituality
Carondelet Center, 1890 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul
For information or registration for this or other upcoming opportunities, like—**Celebrate the Spice-Bearing Women**, April 26, or **Looking through the Eyes of Others: You May Be Surprised by Why You See**, an Art Exhibit featuring the work of Nigerian-born Pakistani-American artist Fawzia Khan, open May-July—www.wisdomwayscenter.org or 651.696.2788 or rdobias@wisdomwayscenter.org.

**Shape of the Divine: Working with Clay as Spiritual Practice**

You will learn how making hand-built vessels can be a process of meditation. Classes will be taught by Virginia Matter, a Benedictine Sister, who is an accomplished artist, spiritual director and Centering Prayer teacher.

Her workshops are a popular part of the Benedictine Center’s “Art and Spirituality” focus which explores how artists encounter God through the creative process:

**Mondays, April 6 through May 11, 6:30-8:15 p.m.**
The Benedictine Center, St. Paul’s Monastery
2675 Benet Road, St. Paul
For information or registration for this or other upcoming opportunities, like—the **School of Lectio Divina**, March 27-April 1, or **Peace Be with You**, April 23—info@benedictinecenter.org or 651.777.7251 or www.benedictinecenter.org.

**The Presence of the Sacred**

Spend the day steeped in the presence of the Sacred in a way that can only be experienced through nature poetry. We will read some old favorites and explore some new poets. Then we will try our hand at creating our own prayer-poetry, with the guidance of an experienced writer and teacher. No poetry writing experience necessary.

Give yourself (or someone you love) the gift of some time apart from the noise and busy-ness of everyday life, with the contemplative immersive experience of reading and writing nature poetry as a spiritual practice:

**Saturday, May 16, 9:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.**
Held at the Blessing House on Wasserman Lake, Victoria, MN
Sponsored by Sacred Ground Center for Spirituality
Carondelet Center, 1890 Randolph, St. Paul

"an invisible fecundity . . . hidden wholeness . . ."

“There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious unity and integrity is wisdom. . . . There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, . . .”

Thomas Merton, Hagia Sophia
Reading Opportunities

Contemplative Church, by Peter Traben Haas, with a “Foreword” by Thomas Keating, and “Afterwords” by Cyprian Consiglio and Ilia Delio

Thanks to Terry Shaughnessy, a spiritual director from St. Paul, who invited attention to this book, which he’d found at Snowmass.

Waiting for it to arrive, Karl Rahner’s Concern for the Church came to mind, with its categoric assertion that “The Christian of the future will be a mystic, or he/she will not exist at all . . . ” with its conviction that a strong commitment to creeds and to theological understanding, to “I believe”—hugely helpful as they can be—cannot take the place of even brief personal experiences of God’s love and presence.

Contemplative Church accepts Rahner’s belief as being both profoundly true and challenging. It provides both a comprehensive survey of the history of contemplative prayer and its place in the Christian community, and a solid background for the teaching of contemplative prayer in the church. And it similarly has two—inter-related and inter-acting—audiences, both those individual members in a church who seek “to recover the contemplative experience of God’s presence in their personal lives,” and those church planners who seek to help this to happen.

And helping this to happen is challenging. Church planners can develop an adult education series on, for example, Henri Nouwen’s “The three things that we as Christians are to do,” and it can reasonably well be made to happen. But openness to the contemplative requires and leads to deep change, a change that cannot be made to happen. “There is no one way to become a contemplative,” Dr. Haas reminds us, “It is always the fruit of the grace of God working in our lives.” Church planners, trusting in that grace, can only seek to provide welcoming opportunities through which people can experience contemplative worship and contemplative prayer.

Contemplative Church offers experiences and lessons-learned in Dr. Haas’ home church and his many retreats. Turning the pages, additional words came to mind, paraphrasing words, words of hope, words for both church planners and church members, “Let there be openness to the contemplative, and let it begin with me.”

John Perkins, Shape Shifting
For many of us, the contemplative journey began as [and is] a journey into [and through] silence. Perhaps one of the earliest things we learned was that the experience of silence is not so much about shutting out as it is about opening ourselves to . . . not so much about external environment as about interior quiet. Sometimes the quiet comes easily, perhaps on a walk in the woods, even a walk surrounded by the noisy songs of birds and the rustling of leaves and the smell of the forest. Sometimes it comes hard. And, we’ve probably also learned that our personal experiences of silence—like those reported by others—vary greatly from time to time, and perhaps change gradually as time goes on. Coming to know silence is probably almost exclusively experiential. Anything that can be said about it is only suggestive, can never be definitive . . . and probably can only be suggestive when it touches upon [and puts words to] some part of the reader’s own past experience. That being emphasized, here are a handful of thoughts and remembered words which rise up and resonate, at least for one traveler, on a winter’s morning:

- “Silence is not the absence of sound . . . but the absence of self . . .” Anthony de Mello
- Matthew Johnson, after the Sunday morning Prayer of Confession, often invited us into “the roominess of silence . . .”
- “Foundational silence is,” Richard Rohr says, “liberating and calming . . . is a deep, interior openness to Presence . . .”
- Silence seems to open and use parts of the brain that are beyond the lineal limitations of thinking and language (as great and crucial as these two gifts are) . . .
- “Silence is the discipline by which the inner fire of God is tended, and kept . . .” Henri Nouwen, The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God through Prayer, Wisdom and Silence
- “A shared, loving silence has far more power to heal than the most well-intentioned words,” Rachael Naomi Remen

And one last thought (which for some reason seems to rise up most strongly of all, at least for now):

Deep Silence and Deep Oneness are pretty much the same thing . . .