



CONTEMPLATION

I regret to report to you that these discourses are not the best instrument for talking about, or pointing to, or communicating what contemplation, meditation, and prayer are about. Far better if we could have a symphony to play—Beethoven's *Fifth* or *Finlandia*. That would be better for pointing to what I want to point to as the human dynamic that is contemplation. Or better than that I think would maybe be Van Gogh's picture of the "Starry Night." If we were just to sit before that picture for a couple of hours until our being was caught up in the whirlpool of the starry night. And better still perhaps would be a good drama, maybe *The Zoo Story* or maybe even something like *The Rhinoceros*, to point to the human dynamic that is contemplation.

Better still, maybe we could select from among our group here the most promising, the most delightful person, or the one that is most filled with life and lay him on this table here and cut his heart out and hold his heart up, and then the last few beats of the heart that you'd see would point to the human dynamic that is contemplation.

If you're squeamish about that kind of human sacrifice we could use a bull just as easily. If we did that I'd want to have one of those men who's a karate expert. One of my colleagues tells me (I don't believe it) that the karate expert becomes so well trained that he is able to put his bare hands into the chest of the bull through the rib cage and remove the heart in the same motion and hold it up while it still beats. If we did something like that you would begin to see or experience the human dynamic that is contemplation.

There is one other way that would do equally as well, I think. I understand that in the East there are people who so train themselves that they can just point, and the intensity of their pointing can injure you internally. (I don't believe this—the same colleague told me this.) Just by the intensity of their pointing they can injure you internally and make you very sick, if not deathly ill. And should they dare touch you, you're dead immediately. Maybe if we had one of those men up here—how are you feeling?—you could begin to point to the human dynamic that is contemplation.

I want to talk about contemplation in four ways. First as raw encounter of the mystery of your own existence. Secondly, I want to talk about it as radical disclosure and I mean by radical here, foundational. The third way is as depth illumination, of the self. And to talk about the same thing in still a fourth way, I want to talk about it as eternal rebecoming.

Before we do that, let's back up for just a moment and look at our master chart of the solitaires, the corporates, and the journeys. In the middle is the category of being, on the left side is the category of transparent knowing, and on the right side is the category of transparent doing. At the top of being is chastity and at the bottom of being is the category of contemplation. On the left of contemplation is meditation and on the right is prayer. On the left of chastity is poverty and on the right is obedience.

These are human dynamics that go on in every man's life. Poverty is the disengagement without which you cannot have authentic engagement in life. Prayer is being your freedom. Meditation is being your sociality. Then I would talk about contemplation today as that encounter with the mystery of your own existence which defines what it means to be a human being.

From the very first birth of self-consciousness you've been contemplating. From the very moment that you break into self-consciousness, contemplation is all that you ever do. Once you break open to the mystery of your own existence, once you bump up against the fear and fascination that being a human being is, then the whole rest of your life is nothing but trying in some way to come to terms with that fear and that fascination. Whether you are playing, whether you are working, whether you are building, whether you are tearing down, whether you are creating or destroying—you are trying in some way to deal with the fear and fascination of being a human being—all of your life.

Then you have to see that contemplation is nothing but the intensification of meditation and the intensification of prayer. Contemplation doesn't exist. Only prayer and meditation exist—freedom and sociality exist—and when they are intensified they . . . But that's not true. Prayer and meditation are only shadowy phantoms of contemplation. They are only manifestations of coming to terms with the mystery, the fear and fascination of your own being. Only contemplation exists, and contemplation doesn't exist. Only prayer and meditation, only freedom and sociality, and disengagement and engagement exist. For me something like this happens: Prayer is intensified into contemplation and reverts back to intensified meditation, and then the dynamic moves the other way. On the other side of that, you can never finally separate any of this chart. But contemplation then is what I want to center in on.

Let me say again, I'm not talking about what only hippies and Buddhists and special people do as exercises. I'm talking about a human dynamic that goes on in the midst of every human being's life, without which you couldn't be a human being, without which you would not be sitting here today. You'd be somewhere else, maybe in an insane asylum or maybe in your grave.

Contemplation is the raw encounter with the mystery that is your existence. I think that comes probably most dramatically at the point of experiencing the fragileness of your own existence, your own creatureliness—although you experience this all the time whether you are aware of it or not. When I was twelve years old my best friend went swimming one day and didn't come home. From that moment until this moment I cannot go into water without being radically conscious of how fragile my life is and how easily it could be snuffed out. Less than a minute—maybe under water, three minutes—and it's gone.

Not very long after that another good friend was horsing around one day. He slipped and broke his neck. Six months later he was dead. He was a center on the football team. Just horsing around with some fellows and flipped, and gone. How fragile human existence is.

Or the other dimension of that, how precarious human existence is. You are thrown up against the raw mystery when you experience the precariousness of your own existence. A phone call from the doctor, an accident in time and space. You just happen to be at a certain place at a certain time and you get run over by a truck.

I was hurrying to a meeting one time on a rainy night, coming down a mountainous road, when suddenly the car swerved out of control and spun around three times in the street. Fortunately it missed both the cars behind and in front of me and the gorge that was on one side and did not hit the mountain that was on the other side. Then I got up and started going, and all of a sudden I wasn't in a hurry any more to get to my meeting. When you bump into this mystery that is just the fragile, precarious contingency of your own being, it relativizes every other thing that you're doing.

I think something like this happens. You are held in being over against the chaotic abyss of the mystery by what I want to call operating images. I like Jonathan Edward's image. It's as if you were hanging by a spider web over the chaotic abyss. Your life is that precarious. And then the mystery. . . something happens—a car gets out of control, or your friend doesn't show up, or someone doesn't speak to you one day, and your images are shattered. You are blown open at the bottom of your being. Your images are thrown into chaos, and you experience psychosis. It's as if you were being raped by the mystery. It's as if everything that you had had to hold you in being, everything you had had to hold your self-consciousness in being, is decimated, and your whole being is blown open at the bottom. And you are just there before the mystery. The experience there is something like psychosis. I think it is psychosis.

It's as if when the first self-conscious being popped into being, somehow he had to make on a tree, or on a cave wall, or out of sticks, some kind of X or some kind of symbol or some kind of image

that would hold him in being over against the mysterious existence, the fearful, fascinating existence of being a self-conscious human being. And then it happens that the mystery breaks in and those images, that X on the tree, that mark on the cave wall, are no longer adequate. They no longer deal with the experience of the mystery. His being is blown open at the bottom. That's what I want to call raw encounter. That's what I want to talk about as psychosis.

And then there's another dimension. It's as if out of our experiences, out of the pictures in our mind, out of the data that we gather, out of the rational structures that we have, we create a montage of images which holds us in being over against the mystery of our existence. And raw encounter is having that montage rearranged by an encounter. Raw encounter, which is contemplation, is having that montage shattered into a hundred pieces, decimated—and that is something like panic for me.

When I was a kid I got lost in the woods. The sun was going down—it would be setting in another ten or fifteen minutes. In another thirty minutes it would have been dark. It was in the southern part of Alabama in a church camp, and it was a marshy area that I had wandered off into. I had already seen four snakes and knew that there were a lot of water moccasins around that part of the country, and I was trying to deal with the new world I had on my hands. I decided that what I could do was spend the night in a tree, that there I would be safe from the water moccasins if I didn't find my way back, and surely they'd send out a search party by the next morning. Well, I happened to walk by a creek and I looked up and I saw a snake sunning itself out on the very tip of the branch of the tree. It must have been five minutes before I woke up again but when I did I was running pell mell through the bush, disregarding trees, bushes. . . Panic.

Raw encounter is something like that. It's panic in which your universe is erased, decimated, removed, and you panic. You lose your context, and you run. Your whole being then is blown open at the very bottom to the mystery that is your own existence.

Secondly, contemplation is the experience of radical disclosure of the undisclosedness of God. This comes to me first of all as absurdity. It's where you see through everything. It's where everywhere you look, you see through it, and you see through to the bottom, and you see that it's absurd.

I remember last year I was assigned to a small town up in the Appalachian mountains to teach a religious education week at one of the small colleges to a bunch of bourgeois who weren't particularly interested in having a religious education week anyway, but they'd always had one, so they were going to have one. We had one afternoon off and I went into the town for a fifty-cent haircut, and then we went over to the one restaurant in town to have a cup of coffee. When the waitress brought the cup of coffee and set it on the table, it flashed through my mind: "Isn't it absurd to spend your one short span of self-consciousness putting coffee on tables? Isn't it absurd to spend your one time around the clock in which you have a brief span of self-consciousness to expend, to decide that the meaning of that self-consciousness is just putting coffee on tables? Being a waitress, isn't that absurd?" Do you see the absurdity of that? And then you know what happened. "Isn't it absurd to be in a little fifty-cent haircut town, up in the mountains of nowhere, telling people something they don't even want to hear?"

You see through to the bottom of life, and what you see there is absurdity. Why this self-conscious being anyway? Why? Where did it come from? And what's it for? And you're thrown finally back against a sheer story. There's nothing else to go back to except some story you tell yourself about waiting on tables or teaching in small towns in the Appalachian mountains. That's all you have to go to.

Do you remember the movie *He Who Must Die*? The Turk says to the Christian, "Why, you're afraid of going to Hell because the story you tell yourself is that you're going to Hell and be punished for eternity for what you did. The story I tell myself is that I do the very same things that you do and I'm going to Heaven for eternity and pleasures. Wouldn't it be a joke," he said, "if both of those were

just stories.”

The other side of absurdity is the wonder, the wonder of self-consciousness. It's the wonder of being able to say yes to an absurd existence and live it as a meaningful one. It's the wonder of the thereness of self-consciousness. It's the rebirth of the wonder, the amazingness of just the thereness of self-conscious existence.

Or the wonder of little things, like sex. Do you remember when you first discovered sex? Do you remember the wonder, the fascination? If you didn't experience wonder when you first discovered sex then you didn't discover sex, you discovered something else. The wonder of just the thereness, the givenness of your life.

Then you look at the other side—the dread, the dreadfilled-ness of your life. Do you remember the dread when you discovered sex? Ah ha, I see some of you do. Do you remember how you hid yourself away to think about it? Do you remember how you were afraid to talk about it? Do you remember the dreadfulness?

My favorite Charlie Brown story deals with this theological point. Charlie Brown is talking to Schroeder about the wonderful new girl that's just moved into the neighborhood up the street and is telling him how beautiful and fabulous and sparkling and wonderful she is. And Schroeder asks him what he said to her. Charlie Brown says, “Well, I couldn't think of anything to say, so I hit her.”

Or do you remember the conversation yesterday where we talked about the vertigo and height? We had more vertigo-ists in that group than in any other group I've ever been in. Half of them must have had the experience of vertigo at heights where you come upon a high place, and the vast expanse spreads out before you and your knees turn into water and you crumble to your knees, and you're still fascinated by the view and you can't leave it and you can't move. You are paralyzed. Paralyzing dread is what you experience when you stand before the mystery that is your own being. It's that activity that I want to point to as contemplation.

Someone in our group said that that was a positive factor—that what happened in vertigo, the paralyzing that went on there, was that your being slipped your gear into neutral so you wouldn't do anything rash, while you could get your universe back together. It gave you time enough to reorient yourself, time enough to close off enough of the mystery so that you could deal with it without just succumbing over the abyss. Maybe the physical manifestation of contemplation is the trembling that you experience in such incidents.

We've been talking about it lately as the tingling in your fingertips. I want to talk about it more as the tremor in your whole being. And it's not really you that tremors. It's the mystery that's shaking in this experience. Your tremor is really your experience of the mystery shaking you in your attempts to place upon it some sort of image or some sort of montage that will make sense out of the mystery. If that doesn't make sense, I'm coming back to that in a moment.

The radical disclosure finally for me—and I really don't know how to talk about this—is the experience of the universe as a totality. It's experiencing yourself as being engaged, as present to the totality of the universe at one time. That for me is what an artist who is an authentic artist is doing when he creates his art that's really art. He's being present with his whole being, with his guts, to the totality of the universe.

The only other way I know to talk about that to myself is a story I once heard about a love feast. This is what our papas called it a long time ago before my day, when they got together after an annual conference and witnessed to what the Lord had been doing in their lives. One man stood up at that time to witness to what life had been doing in his life—that's not strong enough—to witness to what God had been doing in his life. His testimony went something like this: “For the last year I have been

laid off my job because of physical illness. Six months ago my son while coming home from school was hitchhiking because we did not have funds to pay his way home. He decided to come home at Christmas time and was in an automobile accident and was killed. During the funeral and afterwards I was so distraught, anguished, and grieved that I drove my car by accident off a ravine and injured my wife permanently. Praise the Lord." And he sat down.

Well, I don't know how to talk about that yet but it's where you experience the totality of the givenness of your life at one time as one whole, and you are blown open to the undisclosedness. Or radically disclosed to you is the undisclosedness of God, which, you see, is the only way that God discloses himself. He discloses himself as the undisclosable. The only way you know God is to know him as the Unknowable. That doesn't make sense? That's fine. It isn't intended to make sense.

Thirdly, I want to talk about contemplation as **depth illumination** of the self. First of all what happens here is that your actual relationship or disrelationship to life is made clear to you. Now it comes most dramatically where you find your disrelationship to life. What happens here is that your relationship to life is disclosed to you, where it is authentically related and inauthentically related to life, where you are hiding from life and where you are dealing with life. All at once that's made clear. That's what I want to point to with the activity of contemplation.

I was looking just the other day at a picture magazine and I saw a picture of a Vietnamese woman who had an M-16 rifle shoved up against her cheek. And there was a white hand which I decided was an American soldier's pulling her hair. And there was a watchband on that arm. Obviously to my mind that was an American watchband. Whether it was or wasn't is not the point. The point is that that's the way it came to me. All of a sudden I was the murderer at My Lai.

Or do you remember when you first became aware that you are a white racist, after you had pretended all of your life that you weren't racist, that you loved black people? Then you discovered, not only in your interior being, but just by the very fact of being a white man in a white society that you were a white racist, a slavemaster. Contemplation, which is the illumination of the self, is the illumination of your actual relationship to life, and it comes most dramatically in your disrelationship or your inauthentic relationship to life.

Secondly, this illumination comes as the focusing of your life. I like to call it the focusing of your selfhood. It's the point at which you come to terms at the bottom of your being with that issue in your life that you've been fighting all of your life. You know what I mean here. You see a person who all of his life in everything that he does is struggling with only one issue, and maybe that's something like being mama's little boy. No matter what he does, no matter what he's dealing with, no matter what kind of work he's involved with, all he's struggling with is being mama's little boy. Contemplation is the point at which you come to terms at the bottom with that, and you settle it once and for all. Maybe yours is something like wanting people to like you. Contemplation is the place where you come to terms with the bottom of your being and settle once and for all being that being which you are. It's where your selfhood comes together. It's where life itself answers your life.

I don't know here, but I like to say that what I'm pointing to is the focusing of your selfhood. It's something like having your heart strangely warmed. It's where life says yes to you in a radical way. It's not a yes like, "Gee, you're a nice guy," but a yes in terms of answering your total life at the bottom. In contemplation your selfhood is restored. Your being before the mystery of your life is rearranged in a new way and you are re-created anew. You are restored.

Thirdly, the depth illumination of the self is the experience of being known totally. It's the experience of knowing yourself as being known. Do you see you cannot know anything else until you know yourself as being known? You cannot dare to know another human being unless you dare to know that you are known at the bottom of your being. When another human being's life is being

exposed at the bottom, unless you can dare to know that you yourself are known, you have to go and defend him or you have to go and make him happy. You can't stand to see another life exposed unless you know that your life is exposed to the bottom.

Contemplation as depth illumination is experienced fourthly as becoming every man. You become *the* man. You become Adam. Everything that goes on in the universe goes on in you. I like D.H. Lawrence here. "The maniacal horror of it all when everything was myself—skies, trees, flowers. I did it all in myself. Creator, I looked at myself the creation. Created, I looked at myself the Creator." You become every man. And when you become every man, what happens to you happens to all men. When your being is rebirthed, when your being is restored, all men's being is rebirthed, restored. You become the atonement for all men. I don't know if I agree with that but it sounded right when I thought of it. Your life becomes all men.

Well, I'm not clear there, but you see what I'm pointing to. And go back and read D.H. Lawrence, but don't stop until you get to the point where all things become new—where life is resurrected, where life becomes unaccountably new—and not just your life, but all life becomes resurrected or risen.

Finally, the human activity that is contemplation is the activity or the human dynamic of **eternally rebecoming**. First of all, that's something like being bleedingly present to the given situation so that you drain from every given situation of your life the meaning that was in that situation for you from the foundation of the universe. It's the activity or dynamic in which you decide you are able to bleed from every situation the meaning that is in the interior of your own being that was placed there from the beginning of the universe.

I don't know any other way to say that at the moment, but I can point to it this way. It's the experience which all of you have experienced when you said to yourself, "Well, if this is the only experience that I've ever experienced in all of my life, it would have been worth all of the pain and sorrow." It's that experience when you experience life filled full and brimming with meaning, and you say to yourself, "All of the pain of becoming self-conscious has been worth it. If I don't live any longer, it's been worth it up to this point." It's the pearl of high price.

Contemplation is the activity of bleeding from a given situation the interior meaning of that situation that is in the bottom and that was placed in your being from the foundation of the universe. Can you just imagine? The meaning that you missed yesterday because you did not bleed from those situations that you found yourself in the meaning that was there. Contemplation is the human dynamic of bleeding the meaning, of draining the meaning from your given situation.

Contemplation is eternally rebecoming in the sense of all things being made new, in the sense of going through the veil, in the sense of having your montage of the universe reconstituted in a brand new way that gives you your universe as a new universe, as a risen universe, that gives you your selfhood as a new self, as a risen self. My image here is having a dance going on somewhere in the bottom of your being at every moment. Even when you're angry, even when you're hostile, even when you're radically depressed, you have somewhere down in the recesses of your being a dance, a vibrancy, a vitality for life that just keeps dancing in the midst of the despair, in the midst of the hatred for life, in the midst of the anger. In the midst of all these, a dance goes on.

Contemplation is the eternal rebecoming of your life in the sense that it's the rebirth of courage. It's the rebirth of the courage to be in your life. It's like you experience yourself when you run up to a cliff or the edge of the roof of a tall building and you teeter on the edge of the abyss. There's one instant in which you're not sure whether you're going to fall or whether you're going to get your balance—you teeter there. Contemplation is the rebirth of the courage to live all of your life teetering before the abyss. It's the courage to live all of your life before the possibility, before the demand that the mystery break in again upon your montage, your self-image, and shatter it again and recreate it

again. It's the decision to fling yourself over against the abyss, the decision to fling your life over against the mystery of your own existence. You see that this is a forever, a continuing activity.

I was fascinated with the notion in the lecture on meditation about having a hip lock or a half nelson on God. The eternal re-creation is the activity, the human dynamic of eternally rebecoming which is having a hip lock on God. It goes something like this: God, the mystery of your existence refuses to be bound up in images. Every time you put Him into some kind of image or some sort of category, he refuses to be there. Your hip lock upon God is something like this: You say to God, "God, aren't you kindly disposed to man?" And God, of course, says, "Yes, of course." And you say, "Well, then, God, you can't love man in the general. You've got to love him in the particular. And the only way you can love man is to submit yourself to an image or to a montage where we can get hold of you and not go insane or psychotic." So God collapses and submits, and he allows you to call Him the God of Abraham, and Jacob, and Isaac. But then he doesn't stay there. He breaks out. And I suppose when your hip lock was on him, he finally submitted and decided to send a man and let him be born out of the womb of a woman, so that a new image could be born in which you could put a new contentless face upon the mystery. I suppose he must have thought several centuries before he decided to submit there.

Contemplation is the human dynamic that goes on in the midst of every human being's life in which you come to terms with the mystery. It's the only activity that goes on. Everything you do is trying to find some way to come to terms with the awe, with the fearful, fascinating, dread-filled, wondrous existence of being a human being. The only way that that's possible is that you stand before the Word in Jesus Christ.

In Arthur Miller's play *A View from the Bridge* the hero is a tragic hero. He comes on the stage as a rather likable guy, but then he does some rather despicable things and when you are through with the play, he has betrayed his family, he has betrayed his extended family, he has betrayed his community, and he has betrayed the three men that he has taken into his house to hide from the authorities. At the end of the play it becomes known. His life as it actually is is exposed to all about him, and he knows himself as having been known, exposed. He finally ends up out in the middle of the street and kills himself with a hook from the dock yards.

Contemplation is the activity of going through the veil. It's the raw encounter with the mystery. It's the radical disclosure of the undisclosedness of God. It's the depth illumination of your own self, and it's the eternal rebirth of the resurrection. That's possible only in the Word in Jesus Christ. The only other alternative is some kind of suicide. Either you run and you hide, or you decide that you are going to create images—and if they aren't destroyed, you are not going to have them destroyed. The only possibility to live creatively in the midst of contemplation is in the Word in Jesus Christ that permits you to be constantly decimated and constantly resurrected into new life, to be constantly destroyed and constantly risen again in new birth. Contemplation is the rebirth of wonder. Contemplation is the rebirth of fascination. Contemplation is the rebirth of the dance of life. Contemplation is the rebirth of the courage to be. Contemplation is the rebirth of the resurrected life.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.
Come as the fire, and burn.
Come as the water, and cleanse.
Come as the wind, and blow.
Purify, anoint, and consecrate,
Till we are wholly Thine.

George West
July 12, 1970
Summer Spirit
Lecture Series