Finding Our Sacred Ground

A Reflection on the Practice of Contemplative Living at Pendle Hill

by Daniel A. Seeger

Pendle Hill interprets itself as a "Quaker Center for Study and Contemplation." About five years ago someone noticed that the sign by our main gate identified us only as a "Quaker Study Center." What had happened to the term "contemplation?" No one could quite reconstruct how the standard description which appears on all our stationery, on various logos, and in brochures had suffered bowdlerization on the main entrance sign.

One can only guess at the cause of the lapse. Perhaps the word "contemplation" was simply too long for the space available or for the sign-maker, given the degree of skill available, to incorporate into a pleasingly balanced composition. At any rate, with due contrition, a new sign was ordered and installed with the full self-description in place.

The restored sign was up for about two years when the suggestion was made that it ought to be replaced with one describing us simply as a study center, leaving off the word contemplation. The reasoning for this suggestion was that we really do not and cannot provide an atmosphere suitable for contemplation, and that therefore the sign amounted to false advertising. Perhaps it is this thought which inspired the sign originally deemed inadequate. But clearly the possibility looms that, as has been the case with "community," we are going around in circles on another important issue which ought to be at the center of our shared value system. And just as the concept of a Spirit-led community has often been falsely reduced to the very normal desire of every person for the natural affection of family, friends, and neighbors, the concept of contemplation is often falsely equated with peace, quiet, and unstructured leisure. It is not that it is wrong for people to desire peace, quiet, and unstructured leisure. We all need at least some of these things. But our spiritual community is led into disorder if we fail to think precisely about the true meaning of large but fundamental concepts like community and contemplation.

The word contemplation comes from Latin roots. One root is the term *templum,* which refers to an area of the sky studied for auguries by Roman astrologers. Thus, *templum* was not a building on the ground, but an area in the skies on which seers fixed their gaze in order to find the immutable order according to which matters here below should be arranged. Eventually, the term "temple" was used to refer to a place on earth which reflected a sacred order sensed from above. The prefix *con* in Latin usage means a bringing together. Contemplation is the attempt to bring into correspondence one's earthly life and the divine will. Moses truly fulfills the role of the contemplative, not only because he built a sanctuary exactly according to the vision shown him by God on the mountain. He is a contemplative because his great work, accomplished during the Exodus, was guided by God. Jesus was a contemplative in the same sense. It is true that he spent forty days and forty nights in the

desert. But the true measure of his contemplative faithfulness occurred in the shop, on the dusty roads, and amid surly and demanding crowds. Jesus presents the image of the divine life operating under human conditions.

Key to the idea of contemplation is a disposition of the heart to listening. We try to listen deeply to the message of any given moment. Biblical tradition affirms again and again that God speaks to us in and through even our most troubling predicaments. But the tradition does not suggest that this closeness to God, this alignment, is fostered by inactivity. Silence, yes, but not inactivity. Rather, contemplation is the practice of active obedience to the simple call inherent in the complexity of any given situation. As Brother Lawrence makes clear, contemplation is not avoiding dirty pots and pans; rather it is the capacity to regard every pot and pan as if it were one of the sacred vessels of the altar. Or, as Saint Benedict makes clear, contemplation does not involve fending off visitors; rather it is the willingness to regard every wayfarer and guest as if he or she were Jesus Christ himself.

Attuning ourselves to God's agenda means freeing ourselves from our own. This is why asceticism, or detachment, is associated with the deep listening of contemplation. A place of contemplation, a place like Pendle Hill ought to be, is not a place where people do things when they feel like it, but rather they do things when it is time to do them. Saint Benedict wants a monk to put down his pen without dotting his i or crossing his t whenever the bell rings. These are the decisive moments when our readiness to live prayerfully or contemplatively is revealed. Trying to keep out all "intruders" who may require a ministry of some sort is not a form of higher spirituality. Nor is trying to remake Pendle Hill in one's own image two weeks after one arrives. Even when a Resident Program student may have a brilliant idea about a better way to do things at Pendle Hill, our service to his or her life of contemplation would suggest postponing its implementation until after the originator's departure. In order to foster contemplation Pendle Hill should organize its life in a careful and thoughtful way and then avoid projecting apology or defensiveness when students challenge us. Rather, they should be helped to understand that their efforts at reform are subversive of their contemplative aspirations. We should, nevertheless, exploit their good ideas once they depart. One of the most important things we want students to take away with them when they go forth to live prayerfully and contemplatively and to do their work in the world is a capacity to render service without the need to see ego-gratifying results.

What are the activities which foster a contemplative spirit in individuals' lives and in the community life of Pendle Hill?

> Participating in meeting for worship without fail, regardless of one's mood or inclination.
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> Attending classes with an open heart and open mind and with caring and sensitivity for the teacher and one's classmates.
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> Reading assigned material prayerfully, or doing other recommended exercises, in preparation for classes.

Participation in table fellowship at mealtimes with a readiness to serve the needs of anyone, friend or stranger, whom one might encounter in the dining room, without preference.

Doing whatever simple manual tasks are presented in a state of inner silence, without personal desire, with full and centered attention, and with an awareness of the needs of those whom the work is intended to serve.

Using the crafts studio as a meditative space, practicing inner silence while working there, cultivating present-centeredness through the senses of touch and sight, and remaining open and responsive to the possibilities inherent in the raw materials while being obedient to their limitations.

Undertaking retreats in the Spring House, or periods of quiet prayer in the silent space, with a clear sense of purposefulness and under the guidance of a spiritual director.

Having comfortable conversations with old friends with whom we are very familiar is not to practice contemplative living. Unstructured leisure and "doing your own thing" are counter-contemplative activities. The spiritual journey consists not of doing our own thing, but of doing God's thing. When people at Pendle Hill complain about lack of contemplation, we should avoid proposing as a solution a reduction in the number of classes they take. Rather we should explore whether or not they are underprogrammed, and look to the spirit in which they are approaching the activities in which they are engaged. There is no school of spirituality in either the east or the west which commends unstructured time as an avenue to spiritual growth. While people may return to their offices refreshed and prepared for renewed effort after a period of casual rest and recuperation, they are not likely to return spiritually enlarged. It is not necessarily to denigrate the authentic value of free-form vacationing to distinguish it from a program of contemplation and spiritual growth. Nor need we denigrate an appropriate measure of solitude to balance the demands of community.

Proposals to confine Pendle Hill's twenty-five acres and nineteen buildings, and the major part of its endowment income, to the exclusive use of a small circle of Resident Program students do not advance the spirit of contemplation at Pendle Hill.

Our present practice of starting each term with an orientation week in which students are invited to pick the teachers and the courses and the consultants which most excite them starts everything off in an anti-contemplative mode. Courses which advertise their lack of requirement for homework or preparation, and consultants who suggest they are totally open to the leadership of the consultee, are particularly damaging in the anti-contemplative atmosphere they establish. A dynamic in which a relatively "empty" schedule is filled up with a constantly shifting array of improvised activities which compete with each other is also anti-contemplative. It is not that any specific project

or event is unworthy in and of itself. But the smorgasbord approach to daily life tends to pander to individuals' tendency to stick with the things that excite the consciousness with which they arrived, rather than encouraging them to be open and to listen to something new, rather than supporting an effort to change the direction in which they are looking for happiness. Conventional religion, with its prescribed prayers for each day of the year and its highly defined regimens of life, ensures that the seeker is engaged with material he or she may need but would not choose. Admittedly this approach can become rigid and stultifying, joyless and lifeless. But we must take care not, in reaction, to go to an opposite extreme which is equally self-defeating. We must avoid a general approach which tends to enthrone an individual's ingrained preferences and tastes as the arbiter of the spiritual program, for that can never be true contemplation. Even people far advanced in the spiritual path rarely regard a self-designed program as an authentic retreat, and engage the counsel and guidance of a spiritual director when seeking renewal and growth.

The Latin origins of the word contemplation admittedly focus on the transcendent rather than the immanent nature of God. Friends' theology commends a listening to the voice of God within, as well as the voice of God "out there." The challenge of Friends practice is to distinguish the voice of God which is within from many other things not of God which are also within.

> *Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God . . . Therefore, be still a while from thy own thoughts, searching, seeking, desires and imaginations, and be stayed in the principle of God in thee.* (George Fox, in an epistle to Lady Elizabeth Cromwell Claypool, quoted in *The Journal of George Fox,* John L. Nickalls, Editor, published by the Religious Society of Friends in London in 1975).

The careful distinction which George Fox and other Friends repeatedly make between that of God within us and our creaturely wills and biases is a point commonly lost on contemporary people, who, while aspiring to a contemplative life, are nevertheless, through no particular fault of their own, apt to engage in an idolatry of their own notions, thinking that everything that might be either casually or passionately felt must come from God. There is no good or beautiful idea which cannot be made perverse by giving it a slight twist, or carrying it to an extreme. The idea of that of God within, or the Inner Light, is particularly vulnerable in the modern age to misunderstandings derived from the philosophical individualism of Enlightenment thinking, from therapeutic paradigms drawn from the subculture of psychology, and from post-modernist and counter-cultural expressivism. No one ever said that operating a center for study and contemplation would be easy. In conducting our ministry we must read the signs of our times as Jesus read the signs of his. One of the most subtle tasks we face at Pendle Hill is gently to encourage people away from a false willfulness which undermines their, and our, capacity to achieve a truly contemplative experience.

Silence and order, in contrast to inactivity, are both aids to living contemplatively. Silence encourages the listening presence essential to sensing the still small voice from God. Silence disposes

the heart to listen and to respond, to hear and to obey. It fosters awakeness, alertness, aliveness. It creates a kind of space around people and events so each can be savored in its fulness, and the Word within each has the possibility, at least, of being heard. Order is definitely part of the contemplative life. It reminds us of the orderliness which characterizes the Love that moves the universe, the Love that has raised all things up from the formless dust. Order encourages us to move freely and gracefully in tune with the transcendent cosmic harmony.

There is no doubt that contemplative life at Pendle Hill could be enhanced by more order, less individualism, and more silence. Periods of *grand silence,* when everyone is silent, would be an advance over individualized regimens of silence, just as a gathered meeting for worship adds a dimension beyond private devotions.

Our program must address the condition of the people we are meant to serve, and people who come to study and to work at Pendle Hill may not be prepared to withstand more advanced practice at this point. We have sought periods of *grand silence* on one or two occasions but have failed to reach agreement about it. We have achieved a measure of order with the discipline of not scheduling contributions to the smorgasbord of activities during the times of officially conducted classes and activities. We have made progress in establishing the silent space in Firbank. The crafts studio is now a respected contemplative space. We have some additional options open for enhancing the spirit of contemplation at Pendle Hill by revising our approach to classes and to orientation week. We could probably organize an ever-present opportunity for silent dining. It is probably quite possible to organize some (but not all) student living spaces as "silent corridors."

We can be confident that Pendle Hill can gradually extend and deepen its ministry as a place of contemplation. But such progress will depend upon teachers and administrators being clear about what would characterize a truly contemplative atmosphere and upon their exerting leadership. We must not passively allow the informal sub-culture of Pendle Hill to promote false programs of unstructured leisure, or the fending off of sojourners, in the name of contemplative piety.

Contemplation, like community, is not something that Pendle Hill can provide to program participants in return for their tuition payments. Rather, contemplation is a gift which each person at Pendle Hill is invited to offer to everyone else. It is an attitude of listening, of service, and of obedience. It is a willingness to practice holy detachment, to see eternity in things that pass away, and to see infinity in finite things. It is to encourage movement from confusion to order, and from darkness to light. It is to celebrate everything that coheres and endures, and to release what disintegrates and destroys. It is to hear the gentle breath of peace, and to dance in response to the universal harmony of the spheres. It is to understand that we are most truly ourselves when we lose ourselves. It is to realize that the Holy of Holies is not some piece of sacred ground where we take off our shoes: The Holy of Holies is everywhere.