

***Thirty Days with Dr. Albert Rossi:
Preparing to “Become a Healing Presence”***

These passages from Dr. Rossi’s book, “*Becoming a Healing Presence*,” are offered in preparation for his Retreat that will be presented on Saturday October 21, 2017 at the Orthodox Church of the Holy Cross, 11 Wilkins Station Rd, Medford, NJ. They are provided with the permission of Ancient Faith Publishing.

For more information about Dr. Rossi’s Retreat, go to: www.holycrossmedford.org

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<http://store.ancientfaith.com/becoming-a-healing-presence>

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1) Introduction

We are all longing to become something noble, something elevated, something beyond our earthbound selves. We have been created to be “gods,” enfleshed with Christlikeness, in the full sense of the word, children of the living God.

The abiding question is, “How?” How are we to become disposed to receive such nobility? One way is to take these words of Christ seriously: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart...and your neighbor as yourself?” (Luke 10:27).

This little book will build on the assumption that the way we interact with our neighbors, both those close to us and those more remote, is the way we interact with Christ, with the living God.

Christ is everything. Christ is our Physician, our complete healer. He wants us to be His humanity on earth, His healing presence to others. We are a healing presence to others when we give them strength and when we give them hope (p. 15).

Of course, the foundational truth of the Christian life is a life of love. This little book tries to operationalize love in a *concrete* way. During our interactions with others, we know when we give them strength and hope. That is, we know when we empower them or when we diminish them. All we have to do is to observe them as we interact and then watch the way they walk afterward.

The thesis of this book is that we are all called to be a healing presence to others, always. When we are a healing presence to others, we are, in some sense, a healing presence to Christ

Himself, who resides in others. Better said, Christ is the healing presence in us who moves through us to heal others (p. 16).

2) CHAPTER 1 INNER STILLNESS

On an airplane, as a flight prepares to depart, the flight attendant tells the passengers that, in case of an emergency, oxygen bags will drop from overhead. Those passengers with infants will receive two masks. The adult is to put his or her own oxygen mask on first, and only then put a mask on the infant.

For me, as an Italian grandfather, those instructions are counterintuitive. I want to give my life for my grandchild, to care for her first, and then myself. But – and this is a big but – if I truly love my granddaughter, I will put my own oxygen mask on first, then hers. The sequence is vital to my granddaughter's survival. If I don't take care of myself first, both of us might be lost.

The oxygen mask example is a model for becoming a healing presence to others. If I don't take care of myself first, I have nothing to give to others. People seek me out as a counselor and expect that when they come into my office, I have time and energy for them. They don't need a tired, grumpy, sleep-(p. 17) deprived, inattentive, and self-absorbed counselor. The only way I can have something to give is if I have allowed Christ to care for me first and foremost. There is no other way.

I begin to care for myself by centering my being, my soul-mind-body. I allow Christ to center me by gradually becoming still inwardly, which is no small task in today's environment. (18)

3) *STILLNESS IS A CHOICE*

Our elders tell us that the person seeking inner stillness is someone who has embarked upon the journey into his own heart – not someone who shuts himself off physically from others, but someone who “returns into himself,” closing the door of his mind. Solitude is a state of soul, not a matter of geographical location, and the real desert lies within the heart. As St. Basil said, we return to ourselves; and having returned inwardly, we ascend to God.

What kind of journey does the Christian take? To be a Christian is to be a sojourner, for spiritually we are always on the move. We are on a journey through the inward space of the heart, a journey not measured by the hours of our watch or the days on the calendar, for it is a journey out of time into eternity. The seeker begins to wait upon God in stillness and silence (p. 18), no longer talking about God or to God but simply listening. We could say the person who is seeking stillness is seeking to become a healing presence for others.

Exterior silence is a prelude to inner silence. We can't be wrapped in a noisy fog and expect to attain inner silence. Silence is a free choice. Yet the only freedom we have is to say, "Thy will be done," or "My will be done." So our free choice is to want the Lord's will and be open to the silence he provides.

Silence doesn't just happen out of nowhere. Rather, the opposite usually happens. When we least expect it, noise of all sorts can appear from nowhere... (p. 19)

4)

In *Living Prayer*, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom wrote, "The Greek Fathers set this silence, which they called *hesychia*, both as the starting-point and the final achievement of prayer." What does this silence look like? Silence is a way, a state of soul, in which all the powers of the soul and the faculties of the body are completely at peace, quiet, and recollected, perfectly alert yet free from any turmoil or agitation.

In the *Philokalia*, St. Hesychios tells us about this opening to divine mystery, increased intimacy with Christ through contemplation, "It activates the soul to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries and leads us, as far as possible, to a sure knowledge of the inapprehensible God."

Is contemplation rather rare among Orthodox Christians today? Of course, I don't know. But based on my limited experience talking about the personal journey with good-willed Christians, I would concur with St. Hesychios's assessment from ages gone by. On the matter of daily and serious time for prayer, I think we all have a long way to go. And there is no better place to start than here. No better time to start than now.

Of course, this opens many questions. How *do* we deepen our inner stillness? How do stillness and prayer go together? And what is the role of prayer in healing? (pp. 21-22)

5) *THE LANGUAGE OF STILLNESS*

Where do we begin to put the oxygen mask on ourselves first? We begin where the Scriptures tell us to begin. We begin with outer and inner stillness.

Stillness speaks, sometimes clearly and sometimes "though a glass darkly." We know that Psalm 46:10 tells us, "Be still, and know that I *am* God." The converse is implied: If I am not still, I run the danger of not knowing the real God. If I don't know God, I don't know myself, because I am made in God's image and likeness. I need to know God to know who I am, to have an authentic identity. Much of the contemporary search of identity is a deeper, though often unconscious, seeking for Christ within our hearts. (p. 22)

As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, not everything has a name. Some things lead us into a realm beyond words.

In Isaiah 30:15 we find a clear rebuke from God: “For thus says the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel [when the Lord God is mentioned twice, the emphasis means that what follows is important], ‘In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness [stillness] and confidence shall be your strength.’” God’s request of the people is the same request He made of Moses: (p. 22) rest and quietness – that is, stillness. And the next four words in Isaiah are devastating to the Israelites, and to us: “But you would not.” Would not what? Would not be still. “And you said, ‘No, for we will flee on horses... We will ride on swift *horses*.’”

We, too, refuse to be still. We say, in effect, “No! I need to go on the internet and my smartphone. I need to work on my many good projects. I need to talk with friends and plan good things. I will schedule my day with beneficial projects and even church-related work. But, Lord, I’ll tell you one thing: I will not be still.” Okay, but we pay a high price for not being still (p. 23).

6)

We are back to silence being a choice, as led by God. When my daughter was a teenager, she had a sign outside her bedroom door. The sign said, “Everyone is entitled to my opinion.” That may be the way teens think. Beth is now married and living on the other side of the equation. She has learned to be quiet and is trying to raise her three energetic children to value silence. We learn as we grow.

The high price for not being still is the possibility that we might not know God. If we don’t know God, we don’t know ourselves, because we are made in God’s image and likeness. That’s who we are. Hence, today many people are looking for their identity, for their place in the world, for who they are. The only place we can find who we are is in God.

The only person to respond perfectly to God’s desire for stillness was Jesus hanging on the Cross. He did what the Israelites of old refused to do. He did what we often refuse to do. (p. 23) And in that act of supreme stillness, He saved the cosmos.

We need to seek silence so we can begin to be still. Elders tell us that unless we maintain contact with our inner depths, unless there is a *still center* in the middle of the storm, unless in the middle of all our activity we preserve a secret place in our heart where we stand alone with God, we will lose all sense of direction and be torn in pieces. All of us must, to the extent that we can, be hermits of the heart (pp. 23-24).

7) *HOW SYNERGY OPERATES*

We must cooperate with grace. All the good is from Christ. Yet, in the deep mystery of synergy, we have a strategic part to play... (p. 24)

A healing presence is, in a sense, a conduit of fire. The fire of the Godhead, hotter than the sun, goes through the clay conduit, us, and out the other side as fire to another human. We simply allow the fire to go through us. But it is a healing fire nonetheless. Fire goes into us and out from us to heal the wounds of someone else. Of course, the conduit is put aside afterward, empty and hollow, but it was and can again be very useful to Christ to do His loving work for others. We, the conduit, must accept the place of Christ's healing power through us (p. 25).

8)

In his booklet, *The Power of the Name*, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware writes:

When you pray you yourself must be silent ... You must be silent: let the prayer speak. Silence is not merely negative — a pause between words — but highly positive; it is an attitude of attentive alertness, of vigilance and above all of listening. The person who prays is the one who listens to the voice of prayer in his own heart, and he understands that this voice is not his own but that of Another speaking within him.

So, what happens when we are still? We can begin to listen to the voice of God.

When we say the name Jesus, we are both speaking and listening. How do we listen *as* we speak? Therein lies the great mystery of divine communication. God speaks to us in His own intonation, His own coloration, His own harmonious sound.

What happens if we try to become more still and pray, even a little more? St. John Chrysostom said if we try to pray more, we “rouse the snake within us.”

Then how can we learn to stop talking and to start listening? Instead of simply speaking to God, how can we make our own the prayer in which God speaks to us? One way to embark on this journey inward is through the invocation of the Name.

We are interested in getting closer to God. But according to St. Isaac of Syria, it is impossible to draw near to God by any means other than increasing prayer.

Then we assess the size of the task of prayer. And we find that the task is beyond difficult. Abba Agathon said, “To pray is the hardest of all tasks.” If we do not find prayer difficult, perhaps it is because we have not really started to pray (pp. 26-27).

9)

Spiritual authors tell us that we need to spend some time every day being still, either seated or standing. They encourage us to have a “prayer word”—the Jesus Prayer, the single name “Jesus,” some other short prayer, or silence. Our quest for a spiritual life pivots on quiet time and intimacy with Christ. Our quiet time can be part of our personal prayer rule as directed by our spiritual father.

The usual directive is to sit attentively for a period of time every day. *Every day*. In his fine little booklet, *The Power of the Name*, Metropolitan Kallistos says that the Jesus Prayer, or a variant of it, “causes the brightness of the Transfiguration to penetrate into every corner of our life.” He goes on to say that if we spend a few moments in contemplation every day, “we deepen and transform the remaining moments of the day, rendering ourselves available to others, effective and creative in a way that we could not otherwise be” (p. 28)

10)

So we are called to be faithful to our rule of quiet time with the Lord every day, faithful to the Word dwelling in us, faithful to a steadfast call of God that we may “ask, and it will be given to [us]; seek, and [we] will find; knock, and it will be opened [to us]” (Matt. 7:7). Choosing a time to be quiet with Christ, a time of contemplation is our part of the synergy between God and us.

Some people are able to spend twenty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes in the evening, sitting quietly, saying their prayer word. Other people have less time to spend in quiet contemplation. The answer is not arithmetic. Quantity is not primary. Steadfastness in choosing to be still, every day, is primary (pp. 28-29).

11)

What can we expect if we decide to sit quietly for a period of time every time? We learn that when we get quiet, our dark inner world explodes out. All the repressed negative thoughts, all the undone tasks, all the back-up sludge comes to the surface. That’s ugly. So we just stay busy and avoid the discomfort. But if we allow that phase to pass—and it will pass—a gradual peace floods our soul. St. John Chrysostom said that if we continue to pray, we “lay the snake low.” What a beautiful phraseology! We become conquerors. This is a scene of conquest. We gradually begin to allow the light of Christ in, and a gradual expansion of consciousness occurs.

However, like faith, contemplation is a gift we receive, not a program we design. God’s ways often seem serendipitous. During quiet time, we may experience mostly serenity or mostly dryness. Whatever. It was said that Teresa of Avila, the great Roman Catholic saint who founded the Discalced Carmelites, said that for long stretches of time her quiet prayer was spent “counting the grains of sand as they fell through the hourglass.” That is to say, she experience

long periods of dryness during prayer time. Many of the great saints tell of extended hours of this dryness.

We enter our quiet time of contemplation with no expectations except to put ourselves in God's hands. He does with us as He will. We don't expect lower cholesterol, stabilized blood pressure, or a sunny outlook. But we can expect more intimacy with Christ, however that occurs.

Our role is simply to be as still as possible and to pray as best we can, faithfully. God provides the rest.

We trust in God to give us what we need. The soldiers in the Revolutionary War had a saying: "Trust in God and keep your powder dry." Our war is not against other humans. Rather, it is with ourselves. We keep our "powder dry" by doing our part, by choosing to be still. The spiritual war rages, and we can be victorious (pp. 29-30).

12) BREATHING THE NAME

As we try to become still, what do we do? The Fathers suggest that we begin by becoming aware of our breathing. We go gently inside.

As the sixth-century monk St. John Climacus said in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, in the chapter, "A Brief Summary of All the Preceding Steps:" "Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with your every breath. Then indeed you will appreciate the value of stillness." St. Maximus said simply that God is breath. And Philotheos stated, "We must always breathe God."

In our silence we try to become centered. As St. Ignatius Brianchaninov recommends in his book, *On the Jesus Prayer*, we try to be aware of our "quiet steady breathing." He goes on to say, "Breathe with care, gently and slowly."

This all may seem basic, but in today's culture and probably in our own lives, it isn't easy. When my wife and I took the children camping, I was amazed at the campground scene in the early evening. After super and the dishes were cleaned, many families went into their tent for "family time in the woods." Many of those tents had a portable TV, and families sat in those tents watching what they would have watched at home. Hmm. When we went downhill skiing and appreciated the sights and sounds of the majestic mountain, many other skiers had their trusty iPods along so they could listen to whatever they listened to in their usual lives. Hmm. We are all tempted to squash silence on way or another. I am not immune to such diversions.

Let us utter the name of Jesus as often as we breathe. For it is light to our darkened mind. The guarding of the mind is rightly and worthily called light-giving, producer of light, source of light, and bearer of fire.

We should always be turning the name of Jesus Christ around the spaces of our heart as lightning circles around the skies before rain (pp. 31-32).

13) *THE NAME AS BREATH*

What do we breathe? We breathe the name of Jesus. His Person is mysteriously encapsulated in His name. His name is His Presence. “I will strengthen them in the Lord, and the shall walk up and down in His Name” (Zech. 10:12).

We are told in the Bible, “And whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17).

We just breathe His name. As Father Lev Gillet suggests, we “let the Name penetrate our soul—as a drop of oil spreads out and impregnates a cloth. Let nothing of yourself escape. Surrender your whole self and enclose it within the Name.”

I illustrated this quotation during a class I taught at St. Vladimir’s Seminary. During the class, I recited the quotation and put a piece of linen cloth on the desk. Then I put a drop of oil on the cloth. The seminarians and I looked at the single, tan spot of oil on the white cloth. Near the end of class, I picked up the cloth to show the students how the spot had become slightly olive-colored throughout. The “spot” became the entire cloth. That’s the way the name of Jesus penetrates our souls and bodies (p. 33).

14)

Many Orthodox spiritual writers say that one way to embark on this journey inward is through the invocation of the name “Lord Jesus.” They say this isn’t the only way, but it is a way of utmost simplicity.

According to Father Gillet, “The Name itself is a means of purification, a touchstone, a filter through which our thoughts, words, and deeds have to pass to be freed from their impurities. None of them ought to be admitted by us until we pass them through the Name—and the Name excludes all sinful elements.” And, he continues, “This is a severe asceticism. It requires a forgetfulness of self, a dying to self as the Holy Name grows in our soul.”

Popular bookstores are replete with books on living in the present moment. What does that really mean? When we live in the present moment, are we alone with the moment of awareness – or is there more?

We breathe with care, gently and slowly. The gentle repetition of the name may be likened to the beating of wings by which a bird rises into the air. The breathing and repetition of the name must never be labored or forced, hurried, or in the nature of flapping. Rather, it must be gentle, easy, and – let us give the words its deepest meaning -- graceful. When the bird has reached its desired height, it glides effortlessly in flight. It beats its wings only from time to time to remain aloft. So, too, with us. When we attain an awareness of Jesus, then we say His holy name intermittently to keep us focused on

Him. The repetition is resumed only when other thoughts threaten to crowd out the awareness of the Lord.

In *On the Invocation of the Name of Jesus*, Father Gillet says, “Let us not regard our prayer in relation to fulfillment in the future but in relation to fulfillment in Jesus now. Jesus is more than the giver of what others and we need. He is both giver and gift, containing in Himself all good things.” And he adds, “The Name of Jesus brings victory and peace when we are tempted” (pp. 34-35).

15) *THE VOICE OF GOD*

As we slow down to hear our breathing, we can become aware of an inner vastness opening up, a new dimension to our awareness. This is the beginning of an awareness of the holy presence of God. Within that space we can become alert to God guiding and strengthening us, aware of His voice. We slowly become aware of Him as our strength and our song.

When I first began to give retreats in Orthodox churches, I gave one in Washington, D.C. After speaking for a while on the topic of God’s voice, I gave the participants index cards and asked them to describe an experience they’d had of “hearing the voice of God,” not with their ears but with an inner intuition that God was mysteriously making His presence known.

I had never done such an exercise with an Orthodox group and had misgivings, thinking the approach might be too evangelical or too demanding. To my surprise, all the participants began writing energetically, and I heaved a sigh of relief. When they finished, I asked if anyone wanted to share what they had written. A young priest in the back shot up his hand. I asked him to come up to the front and share his notes. (pp. 35-36) [continued tomorrow!]

16)

He began with a sentence I will never forget: “I heard God’s voice in PathMark [a large grocery chain].” I knew one thing at that moment. I knew I had never heard God’s voice in a PathMark, although I had been shopping in one many times.

The priest went on to say that, while he was standing in the checkout line, the woman in front of him gave her eleven-year-old daughter a dollar and pointed to the homeless man standing by the door, and came back to her mother. The mother shook her head, whispered something in the girl’s ear, and again pointed to the homeless man. The girl went to the man, gave him a hug, and returned to her mother. Her mother then gave her a hug. The priest said he heard God telling him that this was the way he ought to treat poor people.

That scene could happen to any of us. A mother teaches her daughter a lesson in loving outreach. Period. And what a lovely lesson for the daughter and the bystanders to learn! However, the priest was making an extravagant claim. He was claiming that, for him, it was not a lesson in altruism but an experience of God speaking directly to him through the actions of the mother and daughter. The priest's interpretation is that of faith, which makes all the difference.

We can see our experiences through the eyes of nature – as acts of altruism – or through the eyes of faith – as God's voice, as the priest had. Perhaps that is what the Lord meant when He said, "But blessed *are* your eyes, for they see, and your ears for they hear" (Matt. 13:16). Are we growing in our ability to see and hear God's voice in daily life? (pp. 36-37)

17) *LIFE as a TREASURE HUNT*

Sometimes the Lord provides wisdom in the unlikeliest of circumstances. I was at a convention, sitting in a small conference room listening to a speaker, when she spoke a sentence that struck my heart: "Life is like a treasure hunt." Somehow I knew she had something special to say to me. She went on to say that she had received three treasures from God that day, and it was early in the afternoon. She recounted her treasures, and they were ordinary. Yet as she perceived them, they were extraordinary. She saw we have only to seek to find the treasures God has hidden for us in our day.

As an aside, right now as I was typing, I stopped to check my email. A woman wrote that she would be coming to my office soon. She attached a photo of her three-year-old son asleep. For me, the attached photo became a small treasure, sent as a gift from God. I could see the boy's sweetly closed eyes as the eyes of an angel, an innocent angelic boy. So life is a treasure hunt for us, wanting us to actively pursue with the eyes of faith the gifts that God is placing in our path. (pp. 37-38) [continued tomorrow]

18)

After that convention, I was passing through airport security. An older man, a TSA employee, checked my bag and asked how my day was going. Intuitively, I knew he had a soft soul. I asked, "Can I tell you a quick anecdote?" He said, "Sure."

So I told him the little story of the woman at the convention. Then he looked me in the eye for a few seconds and said, "You just made my day." His reply made my day, too, of course. It was a hidden treasure, a gift from God to me. And that short exchange, years ago, remains as a treasure in my trove of memories. It became significant enough to include in this book.

Isn't the claim "Life is a treasure hunt" a contemporary interpretation of Matthew 13:44: "the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." The man found the treasure in a field, and knowing that he now possessed a treasure, he was filled with joy. So, too, with us. We can actively look for treasures during our day, perceive them as gifts from God, lovingly given to us, and "sell all that we have" – that is, put aside other interpretations of the events – and see them through the eyes of faith (pp. 38-39) [continued tomorrow]

19)

Treasures come in large and small packages. For example, God gave me a large treasure from my seven-year-old grandson, Collin, when I least expected it.

My daughter, Beth, along with her husband, their three little children, and I went to the Divine Liturgy, followed by an extended coffee hour. As we drove home, the rain was pouring outside, but inside the van we were comfortable. Beth and Greg sat in the front seat, the two small children were in the middle seat, and Collin and I were in the far back seat. With the downpour, Collin and I seemed to have a private room in the back. No one could hear us, and we had fun playing with my smartphone. I asked if he would like to hear his voice on the phone. He sang "Happy Birthday" to my answering machine at home. I then redialed and let him listen to his voice. He giggled. We talked for a while. Then we were quiet, silently listening to the rain on the roof.

Suddenly Collin turned in his car seat, leaned toward me, and asked in a semi-adult voice, "Poppa, who do you love more: God or me?" I groaned inwardly. I didn't need a teaching moment when I felt so comfortable and so cushy. But there we were. His eyes were fixed on mine, and he was expecting a direct answer. I knew he didn't want to hear, "I love both of you," or some extended explanation. His was a simply question needing a straightforward answer.

By God's grace, I shrugged my shoulders, leaned toward him, and said softly, "God." He seemed satisfied, and we rode the rest of the way home in contented silence. Only later did I realize that Collin's question was, in effect, God's question to Abraham: "Abraham, whom do you love more, your family or Me?" (pp. 39-40) [continued tomorrow]

20)

I've told that story to many people. Some say, "Oh, he's too young. I would have said I love Collin more than anything." But I know I would say the same thing again. I think Collin deserved to hear what his poppa believes, unvarnished and unequivocal.

Those God-given opportunities provide much material for the future. A few months later I was in bed with Collin, and I asked if he remembered the exchange. He said, "Oh sure, Poppa." He recounted the entire story.

I said, "Collin, if you don't mind, I'll now ask you, who do you love more, God or Poppa?" His eyes went out of focus, and I knew the question was beyond him. He didn't want to disappoint Poppa by saying God, yet he didn't know what he was really being asked (p. 40) [finished tomorrow!]

21)

In his confusion, Collin asked the perfect question: "Poppa, what do you want me to say?" he wanted me to provide him with the right answer. Sweet little boy.

I softly said, "God."

He then followed with an obedient answer. "Well then, I'll say God."

I don't think Collin had much of an idea what was going on, but he was cooperative and willingly learning from his poppa.

Needless to say, I will revisit that exchange with Collin and his younger brother and sister in the months and years to come. Together we can teach each other about choosing God above all (pp. 40-41).

22) MEMORY AND BREATH

Human memory is deeply flawed and fallible. Psychologists tell us that most memories are negative. Once I gave my psychology class an informal experiment. I asked them to write their first memory anonymously on an index card. I collected the cards and discussed the results with the class. By far, most of the memories were painfully negative. The students' statements included, "I flushed my dad's wallet down the toilet when I was three," and "I broke my arm when I fell out of a tree." Very few were positive memories, and those were rather superficial, like "My earliest memory is my birthday part." We could speculate about the reasons for this, such as living in the fallen state, but the fact remains that our memory is bent toward darkness.

We humans tend to attribute more certainty to our own memory than to actual fact. When asked to give a metaphor for memory, most people suggest a computer or a camera or a digital recorder. We think our memory is a storehouse of valid, static information, rather like a computer's memory. However, that is simply not the case. Memory consists of encoded chemicals that continually change.

Experiments show that a person can write a memory of an event, with details, and be certain of the facts. A few months later, the same person can be asked to recount the same event with the same details and will give a slightly different version. However, the person is just as sure the second time that the memory is incontestable. I know what I experienced, and no one can argue with my subjective experience and my memory of the events. It is mine, and who can argue with me?"

Humility provides an antidote to a prideful belief that our mind can think and remember with certainty. Without God, we can do nothing good, not even remember properly (41-42).

23)

The awareness of our thought patterns and memory provides a platform for continual prayer. And our breath gives us the opportunity to remember Christ, not our thoughts and meandering memories. Along with St. John Climacus in his Step 27, "On Stillness," we can say, "Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with your every breath. Then indeed you will appreciate the value of stillness."

Without humility and some attempt to remember Jesus, the results of comparing memories of the same event become predictable. Two people, especially a married couple, can have the same experience but retain somewhat different memories of the details. If each insists his or her version is the only version, then any challenge becomes an attack on that person's veracity. That spells distance and division between the couple. Sometimes it spells a major argument.

The healing of memories begins with the admission that memory is flawed and changes with time. Left to our own devices – that is, our stream of consciousness and our memories – we can easily become dark and despondent.

We become a healing presence to ourselves by remembering Jesus, as St. John Climacus recommends, and by preserving the joy we have in the present moment. We become a healing presence to others as we try to help them see how memories don't have to control them or paralyze them. Memories, like all of life, can be given to Jesus and transformed into His joy in us (42-43).

24) BREATH AND PRAYER

One of the best definitions of prayer is simply “communication with God.” Never let it be said that prayer is easy. Rather, prayer is a dangerous adventure, and we cannot enter it without risk.

The problem is one of praying attentively, simply, and truthfully without replacing the real God with a false God, an idol or a product of our imagination, and without trying to have a mystical experience.

St. Ignatius Brianchaninov tells us:

It is of the nature of inner prayer to reveal the hidden passions concealed in the human heart and to tame them. Inner prayer shows us our captivity to the fallen spirits, making us realize our imprisonment and freeing us from it ... At times the onset of passions and the invasion of hostile thoughts are so powerful that it leads to a great struggle in the soul. This is the time of hidden martyrdom (43-44).

25)

Prayer changes me, not necessarily the situation. Yet, paradoxically, every prayer changes the entire cosmos. We live with that paradox and pray as best we can.

Once I took a group of students to visit a shelter for pregnant, unwed women. A celibate, unmarried woman directed the shelter. It was a haven for the pregnant women, and the woman who directed the shelter seemed to be a saint. My students were amazed by the care and hospitality they saw. During the question-and-answer session at the end, one student asked, “With all the work you do here, how do you have time to pray?”

Without a blink, the director of the shelter said, “You have been here about an hour. I have prayed fifteen times during your visit.” Enough said. The director prayed during her day, and it seems she prayed incessantly (44-45).

26) BREATH AS A DOORWAY

Stillness coupled with an awareness of our breathing gradually opens our minds to God, rather like a door opening to a new unfolding, an unfolding of the wonder of being loved.

We need silence to still the chaos of the mind. As St. Gregory Palamas said, “That is why some teachers recommend beginners to pay attention to the exhalation and inhalation of their breath, and to restrain it a little, so that while they are watching the breathing, the intellect, too, may be held in check.” Really, we are all beginners.

As we become aware of the other Presence within us, we become attuned to the truth that we have something to give that can heal others. We become increasingly aware of becoming a healing presence to ourselves, and hence, to others as well (45).

27) THE HEALING HEART

God placed our heart in the center of our chest as a gift – a gift of a life-giving energy supply. We begin our reflection on our heart with Jesus’ words, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). Our heart is our treasure-house.

What are we to do with this insight? St. Isaac said we dive into our physical heart to then enter the spiritual heart, the inner universe. He said,

Enter eagerly into the treasure house that is within you, and so you will see the things that are of heaven – for there is but one single entry to them both. The ladder that leads to the Kingdom is hidden within your soul. Flee from sin, dive into yourself, and in your soul you will discover the stairs by which to ascend.

St. Isaac the Syrian’s purpose is to assure us that there exists hidden within each of us, a secret treasure-house, an inner kingdom, that is amazing in its depth and variety. It is a place of wonder and joy, a place of glory, a place of encounter and dialogue. It only we will dive into ourselves, then we will each discover eternity within our own heart (47-48).

28)

Jacob’s ladder starts from the very point where I am at this moment; the gate of heaven is everywhere. And this inner kingdom, present within me here and now, is at the same time the Kingdom of the age to come. The same path leads simultaneously to both of them.

St. Theophan the Recluse wrote in the classic *Unseen Warfare*,

The Homilies of St. Makarios develop this idea of the heart: “The heart governs and reigns over the whole bodily organism; and when grace possesses the ranges of the heart, it rules over all the members and the thoughts. For there, in the heart, is the mind, and all the thoughts of the soul and its expression [*incredibly valid and foreseeing the discoveries of modern neurocardiology*] ... Within the heart are unfathomable depths. There are reception rooms and bedchambers in it, doors and porches, and many offices and passages. In it is the workshop of righteousness and of wickedness. In it is death; in it is life... The heart is Christ’s palace; there Christ the King comes to take His rest, with the angels and the spirits of the saints, He dwells there, walking within it and placing His Kingdom there.

The healing heart is one that is a chapel for Jesus, for His Name to dwell in. The Name of Jesus is a burning light, acting as a lens or prism; it can gather and direct light until Fire (healing power) is kindled within us (48-49).

29)

In the Bible, God is presented as having a heart of His own. “But now your kingdom shall not continue. The Lord has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the Lord has commanded him *to be* commander over His people” (1 Samuel 13:14). And “He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, ‘I have found David the *son* of Jesse, a man after My *own* heart, who will do all My will” (Acts 13:22). God’s heart is a heart of love.

We are made in God’s image and likeness. His being, His heart becomes our heart to the extent that we are capable of opening ourselves to His divine life. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote, “The battle line between good and evil runs through every human heart.”

The heart is where we heal or restore our baptismal grace. St. Gregory of Sinai said that we restore the grace of baptism through many labors in following the commandments and through a constant invocation of the Lord Jesus in prayer: “Let us have only this work of prayer in our heart, without forms, without images, till it warms our heart and makes it burn with ineffable love of the Lord” (49-50).

30)

One day when I was teaching at Pace University, I took a walk between classes along a path through the woods. At times the path would fork into two directions, meeting again further ahead. I asked God which path to take, left or right, as I continued walking. I heard no voice. I saw no direction sign. I didn’t stop to wait for an answer. I simply walked as my heart directed.

To this day I have no idea why the left route was better than the right path for me. But I do believe that somehow God is present in the smallest choices of our lives and, to the extent that we can, we need to include Him in the choices. So, on that day at Pace University, God was with me and preferred the left path for “us” to walk, even though I was apparently alone.

God’s disclosures are not always clear. If we ask for guidance, we can grow in faith by believing that God answers the prayer, no matter how small or large the issue of the moment. St. Nistheros the Great, one of the desert fathers, was asked, “What good work should I be doing??” He responded, “Do whatever your soul desires according to God, and guard your heart.” Yes, we keep the commandments and remain faithful to the Church, that is, “according to God,” and then we are free to listen to the guidance within our heart (50-51).