

Contemplation in a Twentieth Century World of Action

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We are told that Jesus said, "It is not I, but the Father in me who doeth the work." Of late years, I have felt a compelling desire to understand the meaning of this truth with which mystics throughout the ages have expressed authoritative acquaintance. What sort of knowledge is involved here? What *is* this certainty that one is acted *in*; that one's little self is not really the doer? It would seem that this is a unitive knowledge, experienced with such immediacy that there can be no doubting its validity. Seldom perhaps is it really experienced even by most Friends whose way of life is based upon belief in it. Were it truly known most of the time, surely we should have less vocal ministry which reflects the fear, frustration, anger, grief, and weariness with which all too often we respond to the events of the Twentieth Century. When, in a Friends Meeting on Easter Sunday, the ministry centers on the crucifixion and its application to the troubles of our day with no reference to the fact that the tragedy of Good Friday is dissolved in the joy of Resurrection Day, it is as though a light had gone out. Pessimism speaks of lack of faith in a God-directed universe. It implies a sorrowful division between God and man, marked not only by man's failure to know his own wholeness, but also by his failure to know the wholeness of God.

I want to speak about the relevance of contemplation to the healing of pessimism. My remarks will be not scholarly, not capable, for the most part, of objective proof, and highly personal. I have no wish and no right to impose them upon anyone as truth. For no one of us can truth be absolute. With divine assistance through many channels, I have developed a philosophy which is *my present* truth and I am well aware that it is relative, subject to change, and that the imagery with which I clothe it is both inadequate and faulty. Be that as it may, all of the thoughts with which I deal here I claim to be mine, although not a one of them has come to me through my own efforts. I have received them from scattered reading, from treasured books, from sensory and aesthetic experiences, from casual personal contacts, from profoundly close communication with individuals, from dreams, and from those mysterious subliminal regions whence rise our intimations that we are more than we seem. Such ideas as we shall touch upon together are all here--have been here always--and no one of us ever himself created them. They are the words of the Ancient Wisdom, the Perennial Philosophy. I call them mine only in the sense that they have

become part of my particular reality. They have meaning for me as a personal being. I present them to you with humility and in full knowledge that to you and to myself I am still a limited portion of an inconceivable Whole and that I am astronomically far from any final realization even of my own meaning in the total scheme of this unfathomable cosmos. Therefore, my presentation of these concepts cannot be other than partial and, doubtless, very far, indeed, from any ultimate Truth. For how can a part know the whole unless the part consciously and entirely becomes the whole? Our spiritual evolution may be seen as an impressive process involving the slow awakening of consciousness out of a fragmentary inconscient state into one of an all-embracing, fully self-aware oneness. This is a process of a magnitude far too immense to be accomplished in a single human life-span or a few generations. After all, it has taken billions of years to evolve the phenomenon of self-consciousness at last in man!

Our self-consciousness causes each of us to begin his journey on this earth with a feeling of apartness which we accept at first as the natural condition prevailing upon the human landing of the evolutionary staircase. But this separateness is a relative truth only and we begin to sense that it need not be absolute. To refuse the possibility that a present fact may be not the whole truth or that it even may be false is to refuse to climb to higher levels and is even a denial of life itself in which only change and death are certain. If we wish to climb higher, we must learn how to take all of the steps which lead to the next landing. Therefore, where we now stand it is proper and essential that we have developed a personal identity, a recognition of and respect for the uniqueness of all identities, and an ardent desire that the potential of each shall be fulfilled. There is a cosmic purpose in the ego-sense and it cannot be that ego serves only selfishness. We are bound, if we cherish life, rightly to cherish our own individuality until the ego-sense loses itself in a larger identity. Until that time, for our self-fulfillment we take all which seems relevant to our smaller selves and try to make it our own.

I call myself a contemplative. By this I mean that my natural disposition inclines me more in the direction of inward, subjective activity than in that leading to the outward and objective. Most of us combine these tendencies in our natures in varying degrees of balance and emphasis. Neither the contemplative nor the active way is superior. We cannot do without them both, nor can they be separated. But, if I yield to my personal uniqueness as I believe I know it, my own fulfillment will come more readily through the practice of meditation, the study of mysticism and metaphysics, and the habit of writing, than through social action and participation in movements and causes.

In today's world, an individual who is predisposed to be meditative may be regarded as an escapist from the objective realities which press upon our scene in a confusing multitude of events, discoveries, inventions, threats, and crises all of which cry out to be dealt with and solved. This is an age which demands action at every turn. But *is* contemplation the opposite of action? On the contrary, contemplation is a very real kind of action. The very taking place of inner tranquillity is an act and within that condition of peace and silence, invisible to the perceptions of those outside, manifold experiences occur. Friends have always believed that exterior action should spring directly from interior contact with the Living God. Thus, contemplation should be for us a primary act; the basis of all acts to follow. Nor is visible action, let me add, the only fruit of contemplation. If we believe in a spiritual universe, must we not acknowledge at least the possibility that many of the good results of labor in the world may be

greatly owed to the support of invisible power released through the concentrated meditation of certain highly contemplative spirits who never act in the outer world at all? Perhaps our century has an urgent need for more monastics who are genuinely "called". Faith without works may be dead, but works without contemplation in this dangerous era of ours may be disastrously unsound and misdirected. Our Quaker meeting for worship today should be more intensely than ever the heart of our Religious Society. In that hour on First Day Morning quiet, untroubled waiting can bring rest and strength, mental and spiritual clarity; more important still, it can produce a genuine union of souls; for oneness can best be known by going inwards towards the place where all souls meet and where physical appearances and the superficial trappings of personality lose their significance. Indeed, it is doubtful that we can know what brotherhood really means so long as we try only to reach from one outward shape of a person to another while telling ourselves that we *must* love everyone! For oneness is realized by becoming one. When this is experienced, there is no problem of loving. The greatest fruit of contemplation is the growing realization of God as wholeness and the centering of our desire and will completely in the loving of the Divine. To love God is to love all, for there is nothing which is not essentially God. When this knowledge will be secure in my heart, my neighbor will cease to be only my neighbor, for I shall know him as my very self.

I do not know whether contemplatives are born or made, but the setting in which we pass our childhood provides the soil and climate which nurture our spiritual development. My childhood was largely free of religious indoctrination. My parents were not church goers; we did not pray at home, say Grace, read the Bible or talk about God. When I visited my maternal grandparents they took me to Sunday School and church as a matter of course, but I have almost no remembrance of any theological teaching. I really did not like church, but my restlessness during the interminable sermon was mitigated by my love for my grandparents and the privilege of sitting between them while my unimprisoned imagination ran wild and brought relief to my bored young body.

When I was ten I entered an Episcopal school and attended it for five years. From the first, I loved the daily chapel service with its prayers, chants, and hymns, and I gave to it delightedly the instinctive response most of us at some time make to ritual. Now, fifty years later, not infrequently I am drawn to the beauty of ritual, and can feel the strength with which it ties us by symbols to much which has been most important in man's spiritual history.

In my late adolescence and early adulthood, for a few years I was a member of an established Protestant church of a less ritualistic denomination, and I found satisfaction in some of its organizational activities while my children participated in the Sunday School. But gradually the spiritual freedom of my childhood began to overshadow the forms of the church whose particular tenets had never really become rooted in me.

A change of residence brought the opportunity for a change in religious affiliation. I investigated and became a member of the Religious Society of Friends. When I took this step, I felt that I was identifying with a movement which makes possible unfettered freedom in the spiritual search: a freedom which offers the right to relinquish old insights for new when the old seem no longer valid. The painful struggle of one who revolts against doctrines he can no longer believe is

unnecessary in a faith which imposes upon its members no formal creed. No true faith, of course, can ever be creedless.

Inseparable from the freedom to seek Truth according to inner leading, and supremely important to me, is the Quaker's way of seeking through silent waiting for a *direct* experience of the Divine. No teaching, no book, no theological system, no other person can confer upon one this experience, although one or all of these may play their part in helping the seeker to open to that which already is there, concealed in his deepest consciousness. That this living reality can be and is encountered by individuals and by profoundly united groups of individuals is to me the most spell-binding and most compelling adventure which life has set before us. Of late years, the field of far-Eastern thought has greatly enriched and widened the adventure for me and I owe immeasurable debt to the integral philosophy of the late Aurobindo Ghose of India. The writings of Aurobindo, especially *The Life Divine*, *Essays on the Gita*, and *The Synthesis of Yoga*, guide me in my present spiritual needs as a guru guides his disciple.

The delight I feel in anticipating my own encounter with the Ineffable has its seeds in the spiritual freedom of my childhood. Many, perhaps most children, have an affinity for the miraculous. I grew up in an era when few people questioned the wholesomeness of a child's belief in Peter Pan and the fairies, in Santa Claus, elves, and all sorts of supra-normal beings and conditions. My parents did not deliberately teach me such fancies, but they nurtured them by presenting no surface literalism to inhibit the natural transformation of childish concepts into the universal meanings behind the symbols with which we clothe abstract realities as we mature. For me, there was never any shock of discovering that fairies do not exist literally (perhaps they do!) or any resentful idea that grownups had lied about Santa Claus. Instead, I had the privilege of many hours of free play with everything taking place in that magic inner world which needs no physical space or measured time in which to be and to become--the world in which *anything* is possible. I still believe in that world. It is the real world of the spirit and is more certain and enduring than the world of matter, even though each of us must of necessity--even in childhood--come up against the limitations of matter, measured time, and social interaction and must deal with them. But this seemingly solid external reality does not endure very long for a single one of us, though it does have its place and importance. The contemplative life of childhood puts the material and the temporal in its place, and, if the contemplative faculty is preserved, it continues to reveal the transcendent all through adult life.

Thus far, I have avoided formulating any concise definition of contemplation. I dare hope that this discourse taken as a whole will define something of what the term means to me and that it will convey to you the possibility of a wealth of meaning yet to be discovered by us all. Contemplation is not simply withdrawal into meditation. Rather it is a manner of seeing and meeting life in all its aspects. My own contemplative outlook is characterized in ways which might be summed up as a need for and enjoyment of solitude.

Learning to touch an interior silence in the midst of external absence of it is a factor in the achievement of genuine aloneness (which is never to be equated with loneliness). Interior silence allows one to hear more than the physical ear can receive and to see what is invisible to the physical eye. Have you ever stopped to communicate with the growing things--to stand so still before a single blossom and look at it so intently that you exchange with it the very life-essence

which supports both it and you and which becomes so tangible as actually to be seen as an emanation of light? There are many such extended sensory experiences to which our perceptions enlarge when interior silence is present.

Interior silence is an essential element in meditation, but not even in meditation will it be realized so long as we use the time feverishly to wrestle with thoughts and problems and have not the will and patience to wait wordlessly to let silence happen in us. It can come as an utterly peaceful soundlessness and sightlessness, and sometimes this in itself seems all-satisfying. But there is something within the dark stillness which will not leave us in the condition, not let us think that we have reached final bliss. A myriad of experiences can take place within the "silence of Eternity" and these eventually must dispel the darkness. Perhaps we can catch just a glimmer of what may be in store for us by the following analogy: let us imagine that the expanding consciousness is analogous to the expansion of physical vision. I think of my consciousness as contained within my body as though I were encased in a black box. There is no speck of light behind me or to the sides of me. In front of me, too, all is dark except for the oval window of my eyes through which I observe various things appearing in a field of light. I can see other sights whenever my box turns, but the view is always limited and often I am more aware of the inside of the black box than of the scene glimpsed through the optical window. But suppose that suddenly my consciousness is able to step out of the box and there is nothing to shut off the light and all which takes place within it. I am all eyes--in front, in back, above, below, and on all sides! There is nothing to keep me from perceiving *everything* at once. I can scarcely imagine the magnitude and fullness of such unobstructed vision--may not this image symbolize something of the wholeness towards which we are evolving? Have we not always been moving from a state of total darkness towards an awareness of total light even as the tiny seed which germinates within the black soil?

These are a few of the sorts of adventures which may be encountered in solitude and inner silence. There are many others, whether they be met in withdrawal for meditation or while going about our business in the outer world with open eyes. As a contemplative, I am always looking for signs of the infinite and, because I believe that infinity is everywhere, in every form, I am endlessly hoping at last to recognize it everywhere without effort. It is the drawing of the infinite towards itself which makes me love the sky more than the earth and causes me to take envious delight in the flight of birds as they move so freely across it.

All such experiences of the varied degrees of freedom, light, and wholeness lead us on to transcendence and there is no end to them: no end, I dare assert, even though the unseen goal at last be reached. Our spiritual evolution someday may be complete, but the process of attaining that completeness surely is not the sole activity in which the Divine Infinite involves itself. More numerous than the stars may be the experiences yet to come in a cosmic whole which has no limits. There is a paradox here, for the concept of wholeness implies boundaries. How can a whole be both bounded and limitless? Now and again we see that the Divine Oneness not only can be, but is both. At the same time, it is infinite in its self-containment and infinite in its uncontained expansiveness. To me, it seems probable that one of the aspects of full knowledge will be the dissolution of all contradiction presently felt in paradoxes and pairs of opposites.

In spite of the incredible distance of these transcendent possibilities from our human comprehension, some of them can and do become realities to us even now. We need not wait for all eternity to pass before we begin to behold the Light. For eternity does not pass. It is eternally present. And the Light is always here, although clouds obscure and temper its effulgence. We have need of all the intermediate shades of darkness to shield us from the full glory of that effulgence, for until we are prepared in perfect wholeness, the Light unshaded truly would be "too wonderful" for us. Yet even now, at this moment we are in process of exceeding ourselves. Let us examine some of the evidence:

Through contemplation we become more universal in our awareness. We begin to form new attitudes towards some of our human problems. Amongst these are evil and suffering, space and time, aging and dying.

Our spiritual evolution holds the promise that we shall achieve a level upon which we shall be freed of ego-attachment. Our identification with an ego enclosed in a physical body makes it impossible for us to see beyond the span of life suspended between birth and death. We know only what touches our imprisoned sense of Iness. In other words, we exist in a state of more than semi-ignorance, and our limited knowledge gives us scarcely more light than a glow-worm can give in a dark cellar. Jesus from the Cross prayed, "Father, forgive them, for *they know not what they do.*" To me, this is the clearest and simplest of all explanations of the phenomena we call *evil* and *pain*. In the light of total being we now know almost nothing of the ultimate consequences of what we do. Therefore, we hurt ourselves and others, we make shattering mistakes, we blunder upon relative truths by clumsy trial and error and repeatedly we leave destruction and sorrow in our wake. But within every blunder, from the least to the most tragic, the divine principle is pointing the way to our self-exceeding. Sooner or later--in this life or another--there is not one of us who will not awaken to the knowledge that we are being pushed by a power beyond ourselves towards new heights from which, little by little, we shall be able, as the dying James Nayler was able, to "see to the end of all temptation." Jesus said we know not what we do, but he also enjoined us to be perfect, for *He* knew that the experience of the Cross leads eternally to the Resurrection. When perfect Knowledge comes, the dark and the light will fall into place and the motive and consequence of every act will be foreseen fully.

Evil and suffering are closely related to a basic Joy. They are part and parcel of it, difficult as this is for us to accept in the midst of the afflictions to which none of us is immune. The Hindu Trinity, Sat-Chit-Ananda, may be translated as Perfect Being, Perfect Knowledge, Perfect Bliss. All three are inseparable and bliss infuses them all. The mystics who realize God realize joy. Creation is an act of joy. Rama Krishna, the beautiful 19th Century Hindu saint, like a child often sang and danced for pure delight of the Divine. In the touching essay "In Prison Yet Free", Eva Hermann tells how she heard Thomas Kelly claim a joy so basic that the greatest of all tragedies could not take it from him. How can this be? Deeply religious souls often suffer profoundly the sorrows of this world. What then can it mean that they never lose the sense of transcendent joy and how can evil and pain be a part of joy? Again, does the answer lie in our more than semi-ignorance? So long as we are bound only to our ego-consciousness, evil and pain can be only evil and pain. But from a higher level the purpose inherent in all suffering and apparent evil will become clear. Little by little we shall realize that our present mistakes and afflictions are necessary, for they are the very instruments which lead to the disengagement of our expanding

consciousness from its bondage and ignorance on the ego-level. We become increasingly aware that another self than the one called "I" is the thinker and the doer: "Not I, but the Father in me." We have glimpsed a glorious destiny.

It may be feared that, because we now feel "acted in" rather than acting under our own personal power, we shall "lie down on the job" and lapse into blissful inertia. If this is our reaction, then truly we have not yet seen the real vision. For when we have, nothing can keep us from leaping forward with previously unfelt energy and we seem to bring every thought and action to bear upon our hastening towards the light. At the same time, we know that our fresh energy and directness of purpose do not stem from the ego-centre. Many times in the past, from that level, we have tried to force ourselves forward only to experience fatigue, frustration, or failure. From the new centre our progress seems almost effortless. Truly we "mount up with wings as eagles," we "run and are not weary." We have begun to rise towards ever higher levels of conscious experience. But, no matter how exalted these levels may seem as we reach them, we must guard against the error of thinking that we have attained the ultimate. For the Divine is infinite. In it everything may be infinitely experienced and infinitely understood. Our finite minds can but dimly grasp what this may mean, but the concept assures us that in worlds to come our spirit shall never stagnate in any Nirvana of either emptiness or static bliss.

We have here the implication of endless, undivided time and space: a constant present in which an endless multiplicity of phenomena, material and spiritual, are taking place. They are forming, disintegrating, reuniting in new forms--The Dance of Shiva--always in motion, always supported by an underlying perfectly self-aware calm and silence. Our earth and everything upon it is one of these changing phenomena. We know already that the physical universe does not begin and end with our little solar system. Nor does the mental universe begin and end with the mind of man. To have release from earth-bound anxieties, it is essential to hold an image of a total universe which embraces absolutely all that is visible and invisible. Earth-life must be cherished and lived with warm acceptance because it serves a purpose in the whole, but it is not all-important. Like our egos, it has its place in the evolutionary process, but like the ego, it, too, must and will be transcended. It may, indeed, through man's activities or by other forces, disintegrate into bits or into amorphous elements. But the end of the world is not the end of the universe. That which forms all worlds and transcends them will remain forever whole and free. There can be no extinction to be feared though all phenomena may pass away.

Such an image, once it becomes a part of oneself, destroys forever any desire to draw back from the process of bodily aging or the event of physical death. The former leads directly to the latter which now becomes the gateway to exciting adventures of the Spirit. Even when we are most absorbed in earth-life, we have an awareness that to outlaw aging and dying would be to outlaw life itself! Without the element of change and the fact of the death of the body, we might continue to breathe and function, but we should most probably become spiritually sterile, rigid, and lifeless. There is something in us--a secret knowledge--which tells us, long before transcendence of the ego is complete, that one life span is not enough or all that is intended. If we are sensitive, open, and accepting, we notice in ourselves, especially after the half-century mark, many small indications that we actually desire death and know it to be necessary for life's on-going.

Even the pessimist existentialist may be motivated by an unadmitted suspicion of more to come when he conceives of man alone and unprotected, living bravely in an otherwise empty, purposeless, and unfriendly universe. This is a very touching image: man is seen as a great hero whose heroism is in vain. But to me, the very fact that man has it in him even to *desire* to act constructively in what he believes to be a hopeless situation speaks of a truth and a greater Self beyond all his present believing and knowing. The existential act of courage seems born, not of despair, but of secret hope, not of meaninglessness, but of an intuitive, though untrusted transcendental meaning. The impulse which determines the existentialist's decision to live courageously for man's uncertain future, to me, cannot spring from finite human nature, but must have its source in a different centre where the finite is not the ultimate factor.

Meanwhile, although we have glimpsed worlds beyond worlds of both matter and spirit, we continue to live here on our own still green earth. Sometimes we are impatient for release from its burdens and complexities. We long to get on to those other world adventures, especially when the problems of human existence seem incapable of solution and life beyond death appears so challenging. But as the light increases and diminishes our darkness, gradually we arrive at a more balanced perspective. More and more we see that it is unwise, indeed impossible, to skip a single step of the evolutionary ascent. If present problems are ignored, they will reappear in new problems and the new may be even more formidable than the old. In this wonderful universe of worlds beyond worlds *nothing* is to be left out, nothing is unimportant. *Everything* plays its part and cannot be omitted or obliterated. Our life here makes up a tiny cell in the totality of being and becoming and our wider understanding of the boundless totality leads us to a new love for earth, to a new eagerness to know and to experience what earth holds for us, and to a fresh ardor to act to right its wrongs and heal its sufferings. This we must do, not merely for earth's salvation from destruction, not just for love of humanity which is still the love of little selves, but solely, singly, and entirely for the love of God which is the all inclusive Self. That Self will do all these works of love through us and is the utter destroyer of despair.

For the wholeness of God is the greatest fruit of the contemplative life. From the lower levels of the stairway of our spiritual development, for the most part we were not aware that we were not seeing God as whole. Yet, until the vision of universal oneness takes form in us, we fragment God even as we fragment ourselves. We see plainly that primitive ideas of animism, nature spirits, the gods of the great mythologies break the divine into many parts. It is less easy for us to realize that the concepts of God as creator, Father, or Mother--although true in a relative sense--also divide divinity into parts even though we think in terms of only *one* creator of the universe, *one* Father of us all, *one* Mother principle nurturing all that Nature manifests. The conception of one God instead of many is a great achievement in man's spiritual history, but it sets God outside of creation. As heat is not separate from fire, so God is not separate from creation. Quite literally there is nothing which is not God.

As we noted earlier, we at our present stage feel separated from the whole and therefore we cannot know the whole. This sense of apartness is one of the countless states of being which is active within the one Divine being and the struggle of each individual consciousness to exceed itself is one aspect of the ceaseless divine activity. What it shall be when each of us realizes fully the whole of the eternal Being and Becoming is not yet ours to know. But the vision of its truth can be increasingly ours as, contemplatively and willingly we let ourselves experience all the

aspects of the Divine. For God is truly all: Creator, Father, Mother, all material forms, all abstractions, all qualities, energies, powers; God is infinitely individual persons, infinitely Supreme One Person, and beyond all this and simultaneously with it, God is infinitely non-person--the ineffable, the unknowable, the supreme mystery. It is this supreme mystery which is beyond our power to penetrate. We know God through all the visible becomings within the action of the Total Becoming and by the becoming we know our own divinity through our knowledge that everything is divine. But we cannot know That which has never had to become because it has never not been. Yet This to which we can give no name draws us steadily into oneness with its own Supreme Reality.