

## EMBRACING THE CONTEMPLATIVE PROMISE TOGETHER

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Talk given at the inaugural gathering of the Shalem Contemplative Leadership Society  
October 2, 2006

INTRODUCTION (candle lit; other lights out).

Bell. We've all begun to settle in now; hopefully we'll settle in even more fully tonight: in the guided meditation we'll do together, in my exploration of the contemplative promise in relation to the new Shalem Contemplative Leadership Society, and in your small group sharing of your own hopes for the Society.

On this table I have placed a copy of the historical river of some of our main contemplative ancestors that Jerry May once put together for us, which was printed in the Shalem newsletter not long ago, and which you have in your folders. It's here to remind us that we are part of a long mystical stream of people bathed by the ocean of radiant Love who we call God: the One who IS, the One who ceaselessly loves new life into being. The same infinitely wise Love that inspired our spiritual ancestors inspires *us* to carry forward the contemplative promise—the promise of ever truer life in God and its overflow for the world's shalom. And we're invited to do so despite and even through all our limitations and brokenness.

### GUIDED MEDITATION

Let's move toward some guided meditation time now with an open posture, and a few slow, long opening breaths...Our whole bodies receptively loose, alert, poised; our hearts wanting to live from our deep souls in God right through everything going on in and around us—wanting that more than anything else...wanting to let go whatever we cling to that leaves us living from less than our authentic being in the Gracious One.... wanting that authenticity for everyone else as well....

*TURN ON DESERT PHOTO IMAGE*



Let's bring that desire in us now to this scene in a North African desert. Many of our spiritual forebears brought their similar desire to such a desert to be purified and transformed by the Gracious One who beckoned them, ancestors like Moses, Jesus, the Desert Mothers and Fathers, and the later Near Eastern and Western mystics. We could stretch the desert environment to include the forest and mountain solitudes of India and beyond, where Gautama Buddha and so many others have been beckoned. All of these vessels of Spirit returned to human community with the gifts of their spiritual awakening, and to this day they inspire *our* awakening.

Let me share a few of my desert reflections with you before leaving you to your own first-hand experience with this desert scene. The wind is forever cleansing and re-shaping the sand, as the Spirit is forever cleansing and re-shaping our spiritual hearts. One recognizable life form appears in the distance: a bush whose roots beneath the sand sustain enough moisture to thrive. Beneath the confusion of our surface self, we too sense sustaining roots, spiritual roots nourished by a life-spring not of our making, but of our seeking.

We taste that sacred life-spring sparkling in our midst when we see a child's face light up, when a spontaneous loving act happens, when a fresh possibility for life wells up in us, and when we are shown ourselves to be part of the divine beauty and love and community that IS. At some point we begin to sense that holy life-spring alive even in the seeming emptiness and stillness of the sky and sands of our hearts and senses, and in the suffering heat and dryness in and around us.

We exclaim with the Psalmist then, “Where can I go from your Spirit?” Your expansive love wells up everywhere, in the spaciousness before my images and feelings appear, and in them as well. I am born of your loving Spirit, made of it, live in it, die into it, then I am reshaped into a fresh form of your love.

Now let me be quiet for a few minutes and let you be vulnerably present in this desert scene, full of your desire for God. You need grasp for nothing, just be energetically available with a still, liquid mind for whatever you may be given....

(ring bell, turn off projector, turn on lights).

## TALK

However we have been touched in this meditation, I expect it has reminded us that we belong to a far greater reality than our minds can conceive. We’ve let our minds sink into our vulnerable, aware spiritual hearts. When we sit in naked trust, at home in the Beloved, available for whatever is given, we sit on the edge of wonder. Sooner or later we become aware that the wonder has an infinite horizon.

Our spiritual ancestors have used many images for this sacred horizon. One of my favorites is St. Teresa’s crystal castle, where we move through many rooms of transformed awareness, until we arrive in the innermost room of boundary less union. Other great mystics also have used the image of a reflective, multi-faceted crystal or diamond or mirror to describe their gifted awareness of deep spiritual reality.

In Genesis we’re given a description of ourselves in relation to this palpable Mystery. We’re described as images of God. What does that mean? For me, above all, it means that each of us is a unique shaping and reflection of divine loving energy. What is seen in us is what I believe is vividly shown us in Christ. To speak boldly, we are a hologram of God, a distinctive, living slice of the whole, or as John of the Cross in effect put it: each of us is a rock chipped from the great Rock that is God. In Buddhist tradition another image is given: Indra’s net, where each of us is seen as a unique jewel-like node in the net, reflecting all the other jewel-like nodes.

How amazingly intimate these images show us to be, yet how mysterious and painful is the frequent hiddenness of the Love Light we share. All of us here I’m sure have tasted the awakening of our true self in God born of Spirit’s gracious touch. That touch has dissolved the narrow, cramped well of our little-self orientations, whose promises betray us, whose anxiety drives us, whose confusion exhausts us and often leads us astray. I’m equally sure we all have tasted the *loss* of that liberating touch, and we have cried out with John of the Cross, “You fled like the stag after wounding me; I went out calling You, and You were gone.”

Is it any surprise then that toward the end of the second residency of the Shalem contemplative clergy extension program in the summer of 2004 an associate in the class

exclaimed, “We can’t stop now. We’re just beginning. We have to have a phase three!” That comment echoed many other less blunt cries over past years, and it echoed our survey of extension program graduates after that summer.

The now obvious finally got through to the staff. Contemplative awareness is an ever-surprising, unpredictably evolving reality. In its wake we can experience disorientation, ego resistance and a haunted yearning for greater realization of our true life in God. We may well come to perceive ourselves and God in new ways that are not understood by most people around us. Our perceptions may well clash with the larger culture’s values, even those of the religious community to which we belong. Through all of this, we find how delicate our contemplative orientation can be—how easily it is lost or stymied even as we yearn for its deepening and widening in our lives.

Thus we find ourselves needing support from others who share a contemplative orientation, support for the long haul, not just for a year or two. We need people who can help us appreciate and live into the radiant Love that would continually evolve us without violating our freedom. We need people willing to share the vulnerable attentiveness and desire for true life in God that shapes authentic spiritual community, the kind of spiritual community that we likely all have tasted in Shalem gatherings.

We also need more than ongoing support for our deepening *individual* spiritual journeys. As we’ve tasted the treasures of contemplative tradition, many of us have come to see how much they need to be shared for the sake of the religious and world communities’ depth and peace. We need compatriots who can help us to establish a larger beachhead for contemplative orientation in our religious institutions and larger culture. We can be so much more together than alone in this calling.

What does an authentic contemplative orientation promise the world? We all could speak to that out of our own experience. Here’s my own beginning answer. A contemplative orientation shows us who we are in God beyond our over-separate and defensive ego definitions of self. It shows us a quality of presence that touches reality from the inside, touches it more directly than the thinking and sensing mind can do. It invites a quality of mind-in-heartedness. When we let our mind sink into the spiritual heart, that faculty of direct awareness in us, then we are better able to be lovingly present to what is, just as it is, in God. We are open to God’s Spirit uniquely within us dancing with God’s Spirit beyond us, co-authoring forms of creative love.

A contemplative orientation also shows us the inclusive sacredness of all beings in God, a truth that our conflicted world desperately needs to absorb. And contemplative tradition shows us so many vital practices that help dispose us to Spirit’s transformation of our sight and inspiration of our actions. In brief, a contemplative orientation shows us a way of understanding and living into the depth of the Good News for us and the world, the Good News that God is Radiant Love, living in our DNA, ever drawing us in freedom to our true nature in God, and drawing from us the fruits of such realization.

If we've been shown such gifts through a contemplative orientation, then we want it for the world, not just for ourselves. My own sense is that God's Spirit today is calling us and opening the way to live out the profound implications of a contemplative orientation in the many religious, work and social circles of our lives.

One frontier of such calling where Society members could be helpful to one another is in the religious congregation to which we may belong. A contemplative orientation may begin with a small group of people sharing contemplatively oriented prayer, or with some people sharing spiritual direction. Over time, though, the full potential of a contemplative orientation is seen only when it has seeped into every area of the congregation's life. How can we help one another in responding to Spirit's invitations to foster such a reinforcing, expanding contemplative orientation in all dimensions of the congregation's life, with all the transformation this could bring to the that religious community? Can we share our experience of this process with others on the Shalem Society's new dedicated web site? Can we become mentors for one another? Can we contribute to a contemplative congregational manual developed over time from our experiences?

Another example of where Society members could be helpful to one another is in the ways a contemplative orientation can be brought to bear in the world's search for shalom at every level of living. This is especially needed in a time when such peace is so rare, where religious, cultural and political communities often exclusively and imperially define themselves, and where belief in violent solutions to problems is so glorified by many leaders. One of our Shalem graduates, Catherine Whitmire, has just finished a book entitled *Practicing Peace*. She shared with me the manuscript this past summer. Using Quaker-inspired personal actions and understandings over the centuries, which at their best to me reveal a powerful contemplative orientation, she offers us moving witness and imagination for living out the sometimes radical social implications of our contemplative awareness.

There's so much more we could say about the contemplative promise, but I'll let what I've said be a starter for your own further contributions to one another in the days and months ahead.

When the letter was sent out to you last winter inviting you to join the Society and come to this inaugural gathering, the response was overwhelming. Almost overnight you responded by filling up every room of Bon Secours. That certainly confirmed our sense of Spirit-led readiness for such an enduring association. The invitation was restricted to graduates of Shalem extension programs so that we could all share a common background of extensive exposure to a contemplative orientation. Our hope is that our shared formation at Shalem means that we will have a large overlap between us in terms of assumptions and even vocabulary, which we expect can allow us to understand one another a little more and allow us to be more helpful to one another.

We focused on you as *spiritual leaders* in various capacities, because of our hope that we will share not only our own personal needs in the Society but also our desire to let the Spirit lead through us as we seek to be leaven in the world.

We also felt from your feedback over the last few years that we needed a *dedicated* fellowship, a Society where we could trust that everyone shared a basic set of practices that expressed our common desire to further realize our true nature and calling in God. If we are called together to be a vanguard, a leaven for contemplative awareness in our world, then we need the special energy of such dedication to help claim our calling. And we need to foster the imagination, strengths, and community that a contemplative orientation needs if it is to be fully lived out.

All of us are tempted by our often difficult and busy circumstances to settle for narrower and more settled horizons, even as we sense their inadequacy. This is especially true if we feel little support and stimulus from others. I hope the shared discipline of the Society will symbolize our desire for more than that, and that our shared prayers for one another will encourage participation in a larger vision.

I was impressed to read in Cathy Whitmire's manuscript about the incredibly dedicated life of Margaret Fell, the wife of George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. She was credited with the pivotal organizational development of the early Friends movement; she authored many tracts, and she traveled widely in the ministry advocating the contemplative orientation that she so believed was needed by the church and world. She suffered three imprisonments for her Quaker advocacies, and she raised ten children. We're not all capable of sustaining such an energetic life, but it's amazing what the support and encouragement of others who share a similar vision and way can do to draw us further into responsive mission than otherwise would be true.

As much that I've said implies, I believe that we've reached a point in the re-discovery of contemplative tradition today that we're ready for more than scattered individual prayer and actions. I think we're being called to another step, to a new collective contemplative *movement* that shows the riches of that tradition for every dimension of individual and communal living. As we move further into this week together, and as we continue beyond this week, may we glimpse and share something of God's particular promise and hope for us through the Shalem Society that can help to spearhead such a movement and take us beyond the beginning stage that we have known in this country.

So, my dear spiritual friends, let's join together in this adventure, riding the Spirit's winds among us, supporting and inspiring one another as we further embrace the contemplative promise. Let's fervently pray that this new vessel, the Shalem Society for Contemplative Leadership, laden with contemplative treasures, will be a means of grace for us, and through us for our broken but God-soaked world.

Now let me briefly draw out a few slivers of your own vision, with the background of this blossom treated as though it was in a crystal ball, showing us something of the future.

(NEW PHOTO on screen, lights out.)



First, close your eyes and take a relaxing, space-opening breath; gently lean back into the larger gracious Presence....

Now open your eyes and for the next few minutes of silence, look at that image as a symbol of the new Shalem Society. What do you hear or see when you ask, “Beloved, Gracious One, what do you see opening here? What is one hope, however small or large, that you have for me in this forming body? What is one hope you have for the religious community through this Society? What is one hope you have for the world through this forming body?”

RING BELL

Now in the next 2 or 3 minutes please write down your brief answer to those three questions on the sheet given out to you that we will collect when we finish....

Now turn to two other people near you, introduce yourselves if you don’t know one another, and in the next (10) minutes, share whatever may have shown itself to you in response to those three questions.

RING BELL.

A final moment of appreciative silence together.