

# TO BEAR THE BEAMS OF LOVE: CONTEMPLATION AND PERSONAL GROWTH

By GERALD G. MAY

I AM A psychiatrist, and I have studied human behaviour for decades, but I still do not know why people do what they do. I have some understanding of human nature, but neither I nor my most experienced colleagues, with all the best scientific appraisals at our disposal, can predict what a given person will think or feel or do in the future.

Yet people cry out for this kind of knowledge. We turn to psychology, astrology, personality typology, or models of life stages in the hope of finding some sense of power over our destiny. Sometimes we find tastes of help in this. We learn, for example, that most people struggle for independence during their adolescence, or that mid-life is often a time of re-ordering of values and priorities. Or we learn that some of us are more extroverted while others are more introverted. Such understandings can help us feel more connected with the vast family of humanity.

But this kind of knowledge is also seductive. Because we know *some* things about ourselves, we may want to believe we can know *all* things. Thus some psychiatrists and psychologists presume to predict how children will grow, and some spiritual directors presume to predict how people's relationship to God will grow. The fact is, that, when it comes to personal growth, we know very little indeed.

Personal growth, our development as human beings toward fullness and goodness in life, involves our bodies, intellects, talents, social relations and every other conceivable aspect of our lives. The course of this growth is influenced by our inherent capabilities, by the choices we make, by all our social and cultural interactions and by every one of our life experiences. There are far too many variables and potentialities here for any sure conclusions or

predictions to be drawn about the course of our growth. And to this we must add the almost completely unpredictable effects of God's grace, the active expressions of God's love in our lives.

In this light, it is easy to understand why most views of personal growth have not even attempted to be holistic. Generally, and for the most part wisely, they have limited their focus either to theological or psychological aspects of personal growth. Even with these limitations, however, the conclusions they draw must be tentative. Yet the integration of theological and psychological understanding is one of the most exciting undertakings of contemporary Christianity, and it is a noble effort indeed.

The best such attempts, in my opinion, are those that try to be as scientifically accurate as possible, while at the same time recognizing how God's transcendent activity can immediately affect human life and growth in radically transforming ways. The worst systems are those that assume spiritual growth is essentially determined by predictable patterns of human personality and development. Besides being scientifically unsound, these latter approaches leave no room for the surprises of grace. For these reasons, the greatest precision is needed in any attempt to integrate our understandings of psychology and spirituality. With this in mind, I would like to mention a few significant visions of personal growth.

### *Concepts of personal growth*

Modern Christian *theological systems* speak of God's loving creation of humanity, in which each person is given a yearning for God. They address God's gracious self-communication with us individually, communally and historically, through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Theological systems often include some concepts about human personal growth, but their primary focus is on God's action in human life, empowering us to respond freely to grace. The works of Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, Hans Küng, Edward Schillebeeckx, Juan Luis Segundo and Sebastian Moore are representative.<sup>1</sup> Brian McDermott<sup>2</sup> and Herwig Arts<sup>3</sup> describe theological systems that demonstrate an excellent appreciation of human psychology. In a popularized and much less systematic way, the 'Creation Spirituality' of Matthew Fox seeks to bridge theological and psychological understandings.

In contrast to theological systems, *psychological models* place primary emphasis on people's experience of growth, often in the form of stages or phases through which human beings pass. Some, such

as those of Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Erik Erikson<sup>4</sup> are biological and social models that do not refer to God's involvement in human growth. Others address religious dimensions of development, but do not incorporate the radically transforming possibilities of grace. Representative of this group are the models of Carl Jung, Lawrence Kohlberg and James Fowler.<sup>5</sup> Of models that do try to integrate God's transcendent activity with human psychology, Teresa of Avila's *Interior castle* is outstanding, as is the closely related 'process of transforming union' recently proposed by Francis Nemeck and Marie Theresa Coombs.<sup>6</sup> Finally, we might include the classical stages of purgation, illumination and union, which are so focussed on God's transcendent activity that human developmental processes are hardly addressed.

As I have indicated, the more theological of these approaches tend to disregard human psychology, and the more psychological ones tend to overlook grace. Teresa's *Interior castle* is an exception for several reasons. First, Teresa was a superb psychologist. In a manner much like Freud's, she carefully observed interior happenings and articulated them with precision. Second, she did not rely on abstract conclusions drawn from statistics and formal studies. Instead, she used metaphors which, like the parables of Jesus, are able to communicate truth 'from the inside'.

There may be a lesson here. Perhaps the best integrations of psychology and spirituality will come more through story and metaphor than through abstractions. But there is another reason why I think Teresa's model of personal growth is so outstanding. Above all, Teresa was contemplative. In my opinion, only a contemplative perspective can offer any real hope of an integrated appreciation of human spiritual growth. Contemplation seeks truth, but it does not worship knowledge.

### *Integration and contemplation*

For the past twenty-five years, I have been seeking connections between my scientific understanding of persons and my spiritual appreciation of God's loving presence. During the past three of these years, I have reviewed current neurophysiological research in an attempt to correlate spiritual growth with the functioning of the human brain. Yet through all this time I have never interpreted this search as an attempt to integrate psychology and spirituality. Instead, it has felt like a unified growing appreciation of God and

God's creation. Although I have struggled with psychological-versus-spiritual *concepts* in writing and speaking, there has never seemed to be such a separation in my heart. Interiorly, in quiet prayer, there is no conflict.

In contemplation, when my concepts and images of self and God become quiet, there is nothing to reconcile, nothing to integrate. At such times I sense no compartments of myself, no conflict of body, mind or spirit. There may be much in me that fears God's call to deeper love or wants to turn away from my own God-given dignity, but these seem like forces needing transformation rather than 'parts' needing to be brought together. This sense of nothing-to-integrate continues until I try to think or talk about it.

In thinking and talking, our brains use patterns of nerve cell activity that *represent* life. These cellular representations make up our images and understandings of reality, but they are not the reality itself. For the most part, these representations are related and categorized in ways that allow us to organize our thinking. This ability to manipulate our representations helps us appreciate, understand and interact with reality. All too often, however, we assume our representations *are* the reality. Then body, mind, spirit and other separations we have made, seem like real parts of ourselves that need to be integrated. It may even seem as though we 'have' psychologies and spiritualities as different parts of ourselves. This represents a kind of idolatry—a worshiping of our brains' cellular representations of God's truth. In such a false world, integration seems desperately needed, yet it is completely impossible.

But if we hold our images and concepts lightly, remembering that they are representations that at best only partially reflect reality, they can serve us well. They can allow us to appreciate God's truth more precisely, communicate about it more effectively, and respond to it more fully. But this can happen fully only if we worship the true God, not our images. In traditional icons of the risen Christ, the Greek words *Ho On*, 'The Being,' can be found in the background. They are there to help ensure that the image will not be taken for the Holy Mystery it represents. Contemplation can be like these words for us, continually reminding us of the difference between our concepts and the truth they seek to represent.

*Contemplation and contemplative prayer*

From this perspective, I wish to share a few insights that I hope will help ground our appreciation of personal growth in a more contemplative orientation. I have elsewhere defined my understanding of contemplation as a specific psychological state characterized by alert and open qualities of awareness.<sup>7</sup> For this discussion, let me simply say that contemplation consists of a direct, immediate, open-eyed encounter with life as-it-is. When this encounter is centred in desire for and intention toward God, the psychological state of contemplation becomes the spiritual event of contemplative prayer.

The difference between contemplation and contemplative prayer is important. Contemplation, as a psychological state, often occurs naturally and can be taught, learned and developed. Once achieved, a contemplative state can be used for good or for ill. Great athletes and artists are often in such states at times of peak performance. Contemplation was also central to training for *ninjitsu*, the ancient Japanese art of assassination.

We can attune our contemplative practice with the deep desire of our hearts for God, or we can keep our intentions aligned with some other end. That makes the difference. Today, many practices and phenomena are labelled 'spiritual' simply because they relate to unusual levels of awareness. They may be spiritual, depending on one's definition of the word, but they are certainly not all prayer; they are not necessarily grounded in a conscious desire for God and goodness.

*Psychophysiological effects of contemplation*

Over time, the psychological state of contemplation causes changes in human brain function. These effects can be seen in experienced contemplatives, regardless of whether their contemplation is prayerful or not. It should be noted, however, that not all who say they practice contemplation do so as I have defined it. A deadened, dulled, defended state of quiet (which happens frequently among those of us who try to maintain a contemplative practice) is *not* contemplation, and it will not lead to the effects listed below. Neither will states that have trance-like or dissociative qualities.

At present, I have identified three categories of direct effects resulting from contemplation:

1. *Increased clarity and breadth of awareness.* Instead of the usual shifting of focused attention back and forth among different objects and tasks, the experienced contemplative develops a capacity for more panoramic, all-inclusive awareness. This is accompanied by less 'habituation' or 'tuning out' of stimuli that would normally be considered distracting or irrelevant. Thus more information, both external and internal, is available.

2. *More direct and incisive responsiveness to situations.* Since more perceptions are immediately available on a moment-by-moment basis, the contemplative tends to be more present-centred and capable of responding to the unexpected. In addition, experienced contemplatives develop an increased confidence in the natural or 'intuitive' abilities of their minds to respond to the majority of incoming stimuli. Thus while they have more 'perceptive information available, they also have less need to consciously 'think about' what to do with it. This combination of increased information and decreased mental effort enables more immediate and efficient reactions to all situations.

3. *Greater self-knowledge.* Contemplation is an efficient 'laboratory' in which one directly notices the mind's activities. This leads to increased knowledge of the nature and substance of thoughts, sensations, emotions, memories, images and all other mental functions. Mental activities that were previously unnoticed become observable; material that had been 'unconscious' becomes 'conscious'. Intuitive sensitivities become more refined. Personal abilities and vulnerabilities are better identified. Most significantly, the insubstantiality of one's self-image is recognized and, as a result, one becomes less vulnerable to a variety of existential anxieties.

It should be obvious that effects such as these, when well developed, constitute a capacity for massive personal power. A person with heightened perceptions, more direct responsiveness, enhanced self-knowledge and freedom from fear can be a formidable agent for good or for ill. One can expect contemplative practice to lead to personal power; one cannot, however, automatically assume that it will be used for good.

### *Fruits of the Spirit*

Other qualities must determine the difference between simple development of human brain-power and growth towards goodness and love. These other qualities are fruits not of contemplation itself, but of the Spirit acting within and upon hearts yearning for

God and responsive to God's will. These qualities can be found highly developed in people of faith who have no intentional contemplative practice, and many experienced contemplatives may not possess them.

The most important of these qualities are the three theological virtues: faith, hope and love. As these great qualities develop gracefully, one grows in deepening intimacy and loving responsiveness with God and with other people. There is a growing ability to risk that God is present, active and good in all situations, and that creation, including oneself, is loved by God. One turns to God with increasing frequency and growing yearning, and becomes more sensitive to God's invitations and activities in all of life. Along with this comes an increasing capacity for self-transcending compassion and a deep realization of the essential unity of humanity.

To some extent, these qualities can be 'practised' in ways that help condition the brain to be more readily responsive to them. For example, repeated acts of faith can build a deepening sense of confidence in God, and repeated acts of love can develop a more giving orientation. But such conditioning is only a small aspect of growth in faith, hope and love. Much more depends upon an interaction of human willingness and divine grace that cannot be neurologically demonstrated.

Other gifts, powers or capacities that are often associated with spiritual growth include healing abilities, guidance of others, prophetic capacities, relative freedom from attachments, and interior peace and joy. Although these are also related to brain-cell activity, there is no evidence of neurological or psychological changes that 'produce' them; they are more obviously gifts.

#### *The relationship between effects and gifts*

Lest we start to idolize distinctions between the effects of contemplation that seem 'psychological' and the qualities that might seem more 'spiritual', I must point out the delicacy of their relationship with one another. To say that the results of contemplative practice can be attributed to neurological cause-and-effect does not deny their essential God-giveness as potentials of our brains, nor does it exclude God's active intervening grace in their development. Many experiences that occur in contemplative practice can be powerful forces in orienting persons toward God. In true contemplation, for example, one becomes aware of the

insubstantiality of one's representations of reality. Although this awareness drives some persons into desperate attempts to shore up their threatened egos, it also drives others to prayer. Further, the effects of contemplation, by developing a more powerful and well-tuned person, can serve the more gifted spiritual qualities like a highly crafted and tuned instrument serves the composer's music.

Similarly, the theological virtues and 'gifts of the Spirit' have their own transforming and healing effects upon the recipient. As we experience them, they intensify our longing, inspire us, and empower us in every aspect of ourselves toward the love of God and of one another. They may not be caused by changes in our brains, but they certainly cause changes in us.

#### *A contemplative vision of personal growth*

If we were to look at the whole variety of these effects and gifts with a truly contemplative vision, we might see them all as simply different *kinds* of gifts, happening in love to whole persons who are intimately involved with God and with one another. With this vision, spiritual growth *is* personal growth, called forth from God's ongoing creation and made possible by God's transforming grace acting continually within persons, communities and history, toward the end of the fullness of love.

'We are put on earth a little space/That we may learn to bear the beams of love.'<sup>8</sup> I cannot know what these lines meant to William Blake when he wrote them, but to me they reflect a beginning appreciation of the reason for our creation. I think we are indeed meant to bear the beams of love. 'To bear' has two important meanings. First, it means to endure or to suffer, as in 'bearing up under'. Second, it means to bring forth, as in 'bearing good news'. In some situations, as in childbearing, the two meanings become one; a woman bears the pain of labour in order to bear forth a child. It seems to me that God bears us all in a similar way, birthing us in love and bearing with us in love. Love, by its very nature, creates and nurtures. God does precisely this, and we are called to do the same, because we have been given God's lovingness within us as our birthright. In a manner of speaking, we are all called as Mary was called: to bear God's love for us, to bear our deep longing for God, and to bear forth God's love for all creation.

But bearing love is painful. To love means to long, and longing hurts. We may find our love is not returned, or we may lose our



loved ones, and we must suffer when those whom we love are suffering. Beyond these aches and losses, however, love brings still a deeper pain. The simple experience of pure love is so beautiful, so wondrous, so awesome that just to feel it fully can be unbearable. A young pastor once told me he could not bring himself to be very loving toward himself. He neglected to take time for prayer and play, and he resisted allowing others to care for him. His explanation: 'I know these things would make me feel good, but when I start to feel too good, I just can't stand it'. At some point, I think we all pull back from love and goodness.

This becomes very obvious when we face the overwhelming depth of God's direct love for us. John of the Cross used the now famous metaphor of 'the wound of love' to describe God's touch in the human heart. In prayer, Catherine of Genoa heard God tell her, 'If you knew how much I loved you, it would kill you'. And of course there were God's words to Moses: 'No one can look upon my face and live'. It is not surprising, then, that there is much in us that would deny, displace or otherwise resist love. But if we are to bear forth the beams of God's love for others, we must come to bear at least some realization of God's love for us and of our longing for God. For me, this is precisely what spiritual growth is all about.

But we must go beyond Blake's words here, for while this process does involve learning, it more fundamentally relies upon the transforming power of God's grace in our lives. In these days of spiritual renewal, it is all too easy to assume that we can 'learn' spiritual growth. We are conditioned to expect that all growth and development are matters of education, and therefore we are likely to want to learn 'how' to grow in the spiritual life. This makes us overly attached to technique and accomplishment. We may even convince ourselves that we are developing ourselves spiritually, much as we might think of building up our muscles. But spiritual growth is only minimally like this. True spiritual growth must eventually involve the recognition of our essential poverty and utter dependence upon God to empower our development. Spiritual growth is far more a matter of transformation than of learning, of conversion more than accomplishment.

How, then, does our human 'psychology' enter this process? Some might say 'You have to have an ego before you can give it up'. But where does this leave severely handicapped, schizophrenic or mentally retarded persons in the palace of God's reign? What

happens to their dignity before God? I must confess that during the two decades of my work in public psychiatric institutions, I saw far more pure and practical expressions of love coming from my patients than from myself or the most well-adjusted and spiritually sophisticated of my colleagues. Perhaps, as Jesus demonstrated, God's grace works in very special ways through our defects and weaknesses, not simply to heal them, but also to change our hearts through them. And perhaps some of our handicaps make us more available and precious to God. As a friend of mine said about offering spiritual direction to a mentally-retarded man: 'There is room in his inn'.

I am convinced that our capacity for love is not determined by our psychological health. Moreover, overzealous attempts to correct and develop our psychology can even be used to avoid loving acts: 'Please don't expect me to be too loving right now; I'm trying to get myself integrated'. Of course we should seek our own health. To do so is a natural outgrowth of realizing our essential dignity and worth. But it is not, I am convinced, the way to salvation. We will not be saved by health.

If the capacity for love is not determined by basic psychological trust or self-integration, is there any psychological determinant at all? I do think there is one: our willingness to be hurt. The capacity to accept the *pain* of love, and the courage to bear it, are acts of will.

Spiritual growth, as I perceive it, is the developing capacity to be willingly vulnerable to our love for God and one another, and to God's love for us, so that we might *be* that love for all creation. Through this process we approach fulfillment of the two great commandments; to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbours as ourselves. This growth is invited by God in the deepest desires of our hearts, and it is made possible by God's intimate and direct activity in our individual and corporate lives. But its fulfillment also rests upon our essential human freedom: the choices we make for or against God's invitation—which are also choices for or against our own deepest desire—are critically important. If we say yes to this desire and invitation, we express our willingness to try to bear, with God's help, the beauty and the pain of love.

#### *In conclusion*

If I were forced to state the one most central conclusion to be drawn from my review of neurological research, it would be this:

we children of God are so complex and multifaceted in our creation that we can never, throughout the inestimable eons that may lie ahead, expect to comprehend ourselves. At the very best, we will always see ourselves through a glass darkly.

Is there, then, any real standard for appraising the spiritual life? As I have said, the goal of all spiritual life is the greater fulfillment of the two great commandments. This means nothing less than growth in and into the perfection of love. True growth, in this light, draws persons toward one another and toward deeper communion with God together. This, in my opinion, is the only truly reliable standard against which the development of persons and communities can be measured. And even this appraisal must be discerning; it must be an act of prayer.

Surely it is good to study the mysteries of God and of ourselves with all the resources we have. With grace, the knowledge we gain will help us live our lives more fully and creatively. Thus far in human history, however, our knowledge has not helped us be more loving, and it is unlikely to suddenly start doing so. Just as our health will not save us, our knowledge will not save us. Our social action will not save us. Our personal growth will not save us. Our integration of spirituality and psychology will not save us. Neither, I must say, will our contemplation. Yet, if we do not make idols of all these good things, they will help. Together with our freely chosen yes to God and all our other Godward efforts, and with God's graceful and unbound great help, all these things can serve our willingness and vulnerability to bear more fully the beams of love. And as this happens, we may come to realize—make real and really live—the salvation that has already been given.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> McDermott, Brian: *What are they saying about the grace of Christ?* (New York, Paulist Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> McDermott, Brian: *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Arts, Herwig: *With your whole soul* (New York, Paulist, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Erikson, Erik: *Adulthood* (New York, Norton, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Fowler, James: *Stages of faith* (San Francisco, California, Harper & Row, Inc., 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Nemeck, F. K., and Coombs, M. T.: *The spiritual journey* (Wilmington, Delaware, Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987).

<sup>7</sup> May, Gerald: *Will and spirit* (San Francisco, California, Harper & Row, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Blake, William: *Poems and prophecies* (New York, Dutton, 1970), p 10.