

Introduction

CONTEMPLATION, MINDFULNESS, AND COUNSELING

A true sanctuary, even before the life to come,
is a heart free from distractive thoughts
and energized by the Spirit,
for all is done and said there spiritually.

St. Gregory of Sinai

Ours is a culture of mobility. And in the rat-race mentality it promotes, we often fail to live our lives fully. Somehow we have grown accustomed to being on auto-pilot, constantly moving and never stopping, always gunning for the next best thing, and forgetting to appreciate that we already have the most important thing—our life unfolding right here and right now at this moment. Driven by frenzied thoughts and a sensibility that favors action, performance, and results, we do not often have not enough space to even catch, let alone be mindful of one's breathing. And so we go about our lives almost mechanically with little or no awareness of the seed of contemplation buried deep within. This is as true of many, if not most, Christian counselors as it is of their clients.

We live by default, doing what we have been programmed to do. We have been conditioned to believe that busyness and multi-tasking are a mark of effectiveness, that human efforts and plans speed up positive change, and that vitality is acquired by activity. The cultural focus on *doing* as opposed to *being* that society privileges tends to

strengthen this conditioning. Unfortunately, Christian counselors are not exempt from this subtle and all too familiar conditioning.

Our understanding of the spiritual life often mirrors and affirms these values. We regard large, “successful” churches that are abuzz with programs and events with great esteem; we encounter and applaud lay parishioners and church leaders who are seeking after the latest “spiritual technologies”; and those of us who inhabit the walls of seminaries and other religious institutions often hear ourselves and our colleagues trumpet “success,” “numbers,” and “productivity” over faithfulness and a humble walk with God (Mi 6:8).

The child-like faith and solitude of the heart that we are called to live have been trampled by the illusory promises of self-sufficiency and self-assertion, cultural promises that all invade the therapeutic space.

Interior silence and the mindfulness it fosters are almost entirely unknown. The silence within is drowned out by a surround-sound society that proclaims “bigger is better, enough is never enough, and success (as culturally defined) trumps everything.” Inevitably, the drive toward upward mobility results in a downward quality of life often marked by disillusionment, isolation, discontent, and mindless wandering.

Unfortunately, most individuals have grown accustomed to live in this manner, numbed, oblivious, and out of sync with the rhythms of their inmost self. However, there are also those who, through the dissonance of modern life, have come to hear the faint cry of their soul for quiet, rest, healing, mindful living, and communion with the God who made them and loves them.

We see glimpses of this yearning among people we journey with in counseling. In their hurried, noisy, often painful, often fragmented lives, they seek a refuge from the onslaught of competing demands, a momentary pause so that they can catch their breath, a safe space to rest their wearied souls, a freedom they have never known, and a silence and solitude where they might get to know themselves and God.

Impacted, if not assaulted, by an insecure and distracted society, many who seek out a Christian counselor cry out in anguish not just for relief from symptoms but for that healing that is experiential and integrative in nature. No longer will they settle for mere pious words in response to the deep ache in their soul, nor will they accept a

temporary and quick fix for the existential problem of estrangement. Instead, they call for an approach to healing that addresses, in a holistic manner, their broken selves and fractured relationships and enhances their capacity to live meaningful and connected lives. Meeting the pressing needs of such individuals takes the form of a spiritual healing that includes and yet also goes beyond resources contained in psychology and religion. The contemplative approach to healing introduces them to a different experience of self and relationships along with new levels of meaning-making and wholeness.

Integral to this healing is an exploration of connecting points between the client's unique story and the transcendent Christian narrative in a manner that engages body, mind, and spirit. In other words, a different approach to Christian counseling is envisioned—a healing encounter where the experience of inner transformation discloses the client's true identity (Gen 1:26; Gal 2:20) and permeates all aspects of his or her being-in-the-world.

It appears that the appeal for a more holistic approach to counseling—one that engages body, mind, and spirit—has not gone unheeded. In the marketplace, we find stacks of books on spiritually-oriented psychotherapies¹ that fuse religious resources and diverse therapies in the service of those seeking care and counseling. Prayer, Scripture verses, meditation, even religious rituals are utilized more and more alongside various therapeutic techniques in support of the change initiative.

From the vantage point of Christian counselors, this should not be seen as groundbreaking at all. There always has been, in varying degrees, an amalgamation of religion, spirituality, and psychotherapy in the theory and practice of Christian counseling. What is rather unorthodox is to witness our secular counterparts, who in the past have considered anything spiritual as anathema to psychological well-being, adopting a bold and pro-active stance in incorporating quite explicitly religious and spiritual resources into their therapeutic work. It is as if Freud's negative appraisal of religion has weakened its grip, rendering secular psychology more hospitable and open to the role of religion and spirituality in human flourishing.

As a consequence, Christian counselors do not feel as excluded from their secular counterparts as they have in the past. Instead, they

are becoming more deliberate and decisive in forging collaborations with therapists of different persuasions. Indeed, a common ground is being found, and diversity is coming to be seen as a resource instead of a roadblock.

The impetuses for these bridge building efforts are manifold and include: (1) the erosion of singularity in thinking and the promotion of multiple and connected perspectives and practices; (2) a heightened emphasis on treating the whole person as opposed to compartmentalizing the person's distinct yet complementary parts; and (3) the ongoing restorative efforts of God to heal a broken and fragmented world through various means and pathways. Christian practitioners and their secular counterparts are no longer driven by an unbridgeable spirit of competition or exclusion. As a result, they are now poised even more strategically to meet the complex needs of those hungering for a more comprehensive approach to healing.

In reality, the interface of psychology, theology, and spirituality in the practice of care and counseling is far more complex than merely blending psychological interventions with religious resources. Often, the manner in which these domains are brought together is significantly shaped by one's integration framework.²

For someone who prefers *technical eclecticism*, the use of dysfunctional thought record, for example, might be complemented with an exhortation to have the "mind of Christ" as a way to combat pathogenic beliefs surrounding the self. This integrative framework is focused more on choosing from an array of techniques deemed effective in eliciting change without subscribing fully to their theoretical underpinnings.

Another counselor might practice spiritually oriented cognitive-behavioral therapy, an instance of *theoretical integration*, as a way of providing a more extensive procedure for dealing with low self-esteem. In this framework, the counselor is well versed in both the biblical counseling model and the cognitive-behavioral approach to psychotherapy, then extracts their commonalities, and fuses them together to form a unified strategy.

In like manner, a counselor might adhere to an *assimilative integration*, which enables him or her to explore and employ divergent perspectives and practices while remaining grounded in a

particular theoretical orientation. A counselor might draw primarily from cognitive-behavioral therapy and then incorporate other modalities, both religious and otherwise, to complement and enhance his or her therapeutic work with clients.

As one can see, the terrain in which theology, psychology, and spirituality converge and diverge is more like a maze with many possible entry points than a straightforward map with clear-cut directions. In this complex process, there seems to be a need for flexibility and hospitality toward those who offer different yet complementary views so that change in one's own framework, when appropriate and needed, can be pursued.

There have been times in my own journey when a traveler from a different spiritual and psychological path offered a cup of wisdom and the bread of encouragement that furthered my journey. The encounter felt unsettling at first, yet the experience of accompaniment paved the way for shared dialogue, exploration, and discovery. The stranger-turned-guide became a fellow sojourner. Through mutual support we discovered a new vista from which to appreciate the steps each of us had already taken, and we found ourselves emboldened with the courage to discover new territories.

With a new set of eyes to survey the terrain comes an acute awareness of the trends and challenges arising from the amalgamation of modern psychology with Christian theology and spiritual practices. For example, the shift from a deficit model to a strength-focused and positive psychology model is a step in the right direction. However, when Christian counselors incorporate these new technologies into their work with clients without first unpacking their philosophical underpinnings, they implicitly endorse a humanistic agenda that sees the self as the prime mover and source of strength, courage, and determination in the pursuit of change. Slowly and with great subtlety this "selfism"³ sidles into the psyche of these unsuspecting counselors who may then end up utilizing religious resources to help encourage the quest toward self-assertion.

In an age where secular humanism is in full force, it is often easy to be lured into the false promise of self-sufficiency as an adequate antidote to the problem of estrangement. We are led to believe that if we learn to be more self-governing and self-reliant we will be happier,

more fulfilled, content, and more successful. Instead of risking ourselves to be more authentic and alive in our relationships, we adopt a consumerist mentality that tries to fill our inner void with objects and distractions, but which only succeeds in leaving us alone and lonely, insecure, disconnected, and empty.

Hypnotized by the popularity of self-help mentality, we slowly turn away from or pay mere lip service to the spirituality of self-denial, obedience, and surrender—a spirituality that, as we shall see, is nourished by contemplative prayer and mindfulness practices.

Unfortunately, the culturally pervasive self-help mentality has found a home in Christian counseling, and we often find ourselves swayed by the strong current of the larger culture that drowns out or dilutes our deepest convictions. Consequently, instead of opening to the healing presence of the Creator, we end up bowing before the known god—Self.

This cultural message, of course, runs counter to an understanding of Christian faith and life that moves not toward self-promotion but toward self-emptying (Phil 2:5-7), surrender, intimacy, and ultimately union with God (1 John 4:16). By departing from that understanding, we may end up endorsing, along with the larger culture, a portrait of the self as a self-made crystal vase that demands constant psychological polishing rather than as a delicate cracked pot, created, treasured, and redeemed by God.

When we fail to assist clients to take responsibility for their actions out of fear that doing so threatens our relationship with them, we merely help them string leaves together to cover their shame, guilt, and nakedness, thereby stunting the development of their moral agency and moral accountability. Every time we affirm a client's quest for happiness by ignoring the disavowal of commitments they have made to others, whether marital, familial, or communal, we run the risk of furthering their self-seeking behavior without any regard for the needs of others. We run the risk of trading the deep and healing values of Christian faith and life for the shallow values of self-sufficiency and self-aggrandizement. We end up ushering our clients away from the narrow path of surrender, intimacy, and union with God into another wider path that breeds restlessness and dislocation from their true home. Of course, a counselor cannot guide his or her

clients toward that narrow path if he or she has not first made it his or her own path. The daily rhythms of contemplation and mindfulness help the counselor do just that.

The culture of individualism, consumerism, and quick fixes continues to creep into the work of the counselor whenever performance and quick results are the primary motivations. Often we get so extremely busy and preoccupied by our compulsion to quickly remedy “problems” that in reality require an unhurried transformation not only of the head but of the heart, that we grasp for the next best treatment available or hold onto tried and tested modes of intervention. Yet at the end of our therapeutic work we somehow get the sense that something is amiss and unfinished, that somehow all these theories and techniques have fallen short of responding to the soul ache that comes from a deeper, more primal place. Might an attitude of simply *being with* in the moment, of being open, hospitable, and curious, create a sacred space where this soul ache is replaced with soul rest? Might a shift in focus away from what we should be *doing* to how we should *be* in those moments help nurture the stance of *being with* in counseling?

In my own clinical practice, and when conducting peer and student supervision, I have observed and experienced a sense of pressure coming from the unwavering expectation that the counselor must immediately fix or provide solutions to problems presented by clients in therapy. This sense of urgency to act, combined with the counselor’s need to perform and produce results, may create a frenzied atmosphere filled with the false notion and expectation that self-assertion alone is enough to deal with the human predicament of estrangement, dislocation, and discontent. It is precisely the tendency to act, often prematurely, in the face of pressure to provide quick solutions that perpetuates this notion.

But it does not have to be this way. Our action (doing) when it is born out of contemplation (being) has the potential to create an experience in which both the counselor and the client are held together by an experience of *being with*. In this experience, the first response is an attitude of full attention to the present moment; it is a hospitable, non-reactive, non-judgmental, patient waiting, thereafter leading to appropriate responses to what is unfolding in the present moment.

Sara⁴ showed up for her second session distraught and in tears. Instead of my usual penchant to inquire, I restrained myself and waited patiently and silently for her to tell me her story at her own pace and in her own unique way of expressing it. I sat there in silence but fully engaged, honoring her need and unspoken request just to be with her, providing accompaniment with my undivided presence, void of any words or gestures to intervene. There arose an experience of *being with* marked by full attention, expanding hospitality, and purposeful response. Having created a space for Sara to experience herself fully, without interruptions or ready-made interventions on my part, we were both freed from the tyranny of having to “fix” her, and instead felt freer to explore multiple options to care for her.

Being grounded in and mindful of the present moment is a testament to our dependence on the sufficiency of the presence of God in directing our paths. Such complete surrender of all that we are and all that we do renders us more open to the ways and works of God. To put it differently, remaining on the path of surrender, intimacy, communion, and union with God shapes our being and doing with those whom God has placed in our care. Chapter 1 seeks to clarify the complexity of this terrain and offers another perspective by which these challenges can be addressed.

Therapy has the potential to offer a space where the weary can lay their heads and find rest, nourishment, and healing. Salient to facilitating a reparative encounter or corrective emotional experience⁵ is the attitude that we bring as providers of care, an attitude which is colored by our beliefs about human nature, human relationships, and the process of change. The counseling perspective proffered here re-revisions the identity of counselors (and by extension those seeking care) as inherently contemplative. It sees the therapeutic relationship as a space where contemplation is nourished and where change and transformation of the soul grows out of mindful and welcoming reception of the gift of the present moment. The contemplative approach to care and counseling paints an alternative therapeutic landscape and offers a response to the challenges that beset us these days.

It is important at this juncture to define key terms that will help frame our ensuing discussion. The word *contemplation* is used to refer to the loving and experiential knowledge of God. Following Gregory

the Great, it is both a gift of God and a fruit of ongoing reflection on and reception of the word of God. Simply, contemplation is resting in the assurance and experience of God's love that permeates all aspects of our being:

In this resting and stillness the mind and heart are not actively seeking Him, but are beginning to experience, to taste, what they have been seeking. This places them in a state of tranquility and profound interior peace. This state is not the suspension of all action, but a mingling of a few simple acts to sustain one's attention to God with loving experience of God's presence.⁶

The life of contemplation is nourished in many ways, including various mindfulness practices characterized by ongoing attention and a hospitable, non-grasping, non-judging, compassionate stance toward the gift of the naked now⁷ as it is experienced interiorly and relationally. By mindful awareness of our breathing, bodily sensations, emotional states, and thought patterns, we clear our interior space so that the gift of contemplation can be received. As Mary Jo Meadow indicates, the non-discursive aspect of the contemplative life generates self-knowledge that leads to a loving knowledge of God and is a "particularly potent and direct method of purification for the nakedness of spirit needed for a very deep experience of God."⁸

The contemplative approach to care and counseling requires a primary commitment by the counselor to cultivate this loving and experiential knowledge of God. Such knowledge of (and being known by) God intimately frames the identity and function of the Christian counselor. The contemplative counselor lives and works out of the deep well of mindfulness, which opens up the possibility of living fully awakened and receptive to the gift of the present moment as shared and experienced by the therapeutic dyad.

By entering into the deep silence where God is known in love, the Christian counselor (and the client) begins letting go of the tendency to rely heavily on his or her own strength to facilitate the healing process and so becomes more open to the Spirit of God who makes everything new and redeems all there is. From a contemplative stance, all knowledge, skills, and techniques retreat to the background. What

takes center stage is the self-emptying of all good and godly intentions, along with an openness to the healing power of *being with* oneself, the other, and God, while allowing that dynamic to dictate the process and outcome of psychotherapy.

When we approach counseling from a contemplative stance, we become more available and accessible to our clients and our minds become open and attentive instead of being consumed by the need to perform and deliver results. Such a welcoming stance is nourished not by self-assertion but by the self-transcendence that comes out of the silence and solitude within which the heart gazes upon the face of God.

The open reception to what is unfolding in the here and now and the conscious recognition of our dependence on God prepare the way of the Lord whose presence we acknowledge by being fully present ourselves. Chapter 2 delves deeply into this new way of living, loving, and laboring.

Central to the life of contemplation is the experience of the integration of body (through mindful breathing and awareness of bodily sensations), mind (through awareness of thoughts and emotions), and spirit (through prayer, *lectio divina* or holy reading, and other spiritual practices). This integration requires cultivation and must be ongoing and woven into the fabric of the daily rhythms of life.

The intentional pursuit of a contemplative life is both natural—it is who we are—and supernatural—it is a gift from God. The creation narrative reveals that humans are fashioned in an intricately integrative manner; from the dust of the ground God formed man and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living being (Gen 2:6-7). The contemplative life is grounded in both God's creative work and God's intentions for us.

Though the seed of contemplation is buried beneath all the distractions, zealous actions, and restless movements of our lives, it remains hidden and yet waiting to burst forth. What is naturally or inherently human cannot be denied or completely silenced; this seed of contemplation compels us toward a deeper communion with ourselves, others, and God. The hunger for intimacy and union is not satisfied through episodic spiritual or psychological regimens, but through daily and simple contemplative and mindfulness practices.

Personally, my own journey toward the contemplative life started years ago through an encounter with the writings of Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen. As my spiritual guides, they provided a map to this ancient path that was simple yet demanding in its call to surrender all.

This journey led me to an experience so powerful it felt like a second conversion. At a spiritual retreat in Atlanta, Georgia, I experienced profound communion with God, not through words or gestures but through silence and solitude. Since then, every single day has been an opportunity to renew my commitment to a contemplative life through the regular practice of contemplative prayer and other spiritual habits of the soul, and through mindful breathing and other mindfulness awareness practices.

Tending to our interior ground results in a re-ordering of life and priorities. Silence, stillness, and solitude of the heart become norms for engagement and obedience, surrender and self-transcendence, all of which are responses to God's invitation to intimacy, communion, and action. The life of contemplation and mindfulness is discussed in depth in chapter 3.

As said previously, the contemplative life is integrative in nature. The seed of contemplation that is planted deep within grows fuller and richer, impacting all of life, touching and weaving together the realms of the personal and professional. Suffice it to say at this point that, when the daily rhythms of contemplative and mindfulness practice are integrated into the life of the counselor, he or she develops a way of being in therapy that will likely be markedly different from the way he or she was in therapy before taking up these practices.

Faithful adherence to these rhythmic movements (1) facilitates both a posture of openness and a non-judging, non-grasping presence and hospitality; (2) strengthens the counselor's ability to notice and attend to the textured experience of the client; and (3) highlights the need to discern and clarify God's ongoing presence, guidance, and direction in the therapeutic work. In other words, the contemplative way of being informs and shapes a particular kind of presence and a different way of conducting therapy.

For the contemplative counselor, this means a daily and intentional "self-emptying" of all "self-descriptors" (theological commitments,

psychological training, clinical experience, and social location), and mindful awareness of the gift of the present moment. Such self-emptying and mindful awareness open the interior and relational space needed if we are to tend to God's presence and direction in the sacred therapeutic space.

Since counseling is intersubjective in nature, both the counselor and client are changed as a result of this encounter. Though this book is essentially about the journey of the counselor toward contemplation, it also explores the impact of this way of being upon the lives of clients. The contemplative and mindful stance of the counselor provides an opportunity for the client to have the same attitude toward him or herself. As the counselor notices without judgment the shifts in the client's internal processes, the latter discovers that he or she also has the capacity to be welcoming and compassionate toward his or her own subjective experiences. In other words, what is experienced relationally is slowly internalized by the client, becoming his or her own. This may include adopting certain contemplative and mindfulness practices introduced in counseling that support the nourishment of this new way of being.

Chapter 4 examines with sustained focus the personal and interior life of the counselor and the fruit it generates when linked with the professional practices of counseling. We shall also examine the impact of the contemplative and mindful stance of the counselor on the client's self-understanding and self-experiencing.

The contemplative life does not begin or end in the therapeutic hour. It both precedes and follows, and thus encircles or embraces, the meeting of two individuals who are bound by the commitment to *be-with*. It extends beyond this into a life that is characterized by a commitment toward positive social values. The restful and worshipful practice of the contemplative life provides counselors with the strength and quiet confidence to accept God's call to "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mi 6:8) with integrity and conviction. This commitment is demonstrated in two ways—personally within the particularity of the counselor's social location and professionally in the clinical context. The personhood of the contemplative counselor includes responsible engagement in simple acts of justice and the promotion of peace in the form of social advocacy and political activism.

Professionally, the contemplative counselor addresses issues such as racism, sexism, and classism embedded in the experience of the suffering of clients. The complex issues that clients bring to counseling, though intensely personal, are intricately linked to or shaped by the current social and cultural ethos. This psycho-systemic view of reality deepens the counselor's commitment toward the transformation of both personal and social worlds. Chapter 5 unpacks this seamless movement of contemplation and social action as experienced personally by the counselor within his or her social matrix and professionally in his or her work with clients.

The embodied and shared experience of God in the therapeutic sacred space has the potential to re-orient the relationship between the counselor and the client. During the course of treatment, the therapeutic dyad becomes increasingly aware that they are icons to each other, beloved of God and recipients of divine love in equal measure. Together they recognize their common bond by virtue of who they are in Christ and, out of that shared identity, they fulfill their unique and clearly defined roles in both counseling and in their life's calling.

It is within the context of mindful relationships, and not in isolation and self-preoccupation, that true and authentic selves are discovered. The self-knowledge that springs from encountering another leads to a deepening and loving experiential knowledge of the Other. Such experiential knowledge of God gives rise to an attitude of worship, awe, and reverence.

The surrender and humility characteristic of worship, awe, and reverence arise only from a heart that is open, still, and quiet. In a therapeutic encounter grounded in deepening mindfulness and contemplation and infused with a sense of worship and awe, both counselor and client are drawn into the healing mystery of God. Chapter 6 offers a glimpse of what it is like to sustain a life of contemplation understood as a life of worship.

This little book is written for Christian counselors with varying degrees of clinical experience. First, it aims at targeting seasoned practitioners who desire to reinforce their identity as followers of Christ not through external moves but through a journey inward. This will be particularly helpful to those who, through the course of time and due to increasing demands by the profession, have come to feel lost or

disoriented with the persons they are becoming. The book offers an alternative path to rediscovering the call that started them off on the journey to becoming wounded healers. It also invites these clinicians to consider going beyond their default (often Western-based) theoretical tool box and engage resources from other religious and healing traditions in a conversation around unconventional ways of being in therapy.

Second, the book is also meant for those who have just stepped onto the path of becoming a Christian counselor. It offers a guide to novice clinicians who desire to anchor their identity in Christ as they venture into their vocation that is practiced in a largely consumerist, restless, insecure, and unhappy world. By grounding themselves in a place of mindful interior rest, they gain the inner strength and quiet confidence to do their work.

Third, the book is conceived with graduate students in counseling in mind as well. In this formative stage of their professional development, they will confront multiple voices clamoring for their attention and allegiance. This book offers an alternative voice that will be familiar yet new at the same time, affirming their convictions and inviting them to expand their horizon.

And lastly, those who are simply curious about the personhood and practices of a contemplative counselor may benefit from this work. Such readers will find a deeply personal account of formation and transformation that will hopefully inspire them to consider cultivating the seed of contemplation buried in their own interior garden.

The quote by St. Gregory of Sinai at the beginning of this introduction describes well the essence of this book: to illuminate that ancient path that will lead those who are hurting to a place where they can begin to heal, rest, and regain strength in the sanctuary of God that is found in their inmost self and in their lives with others. I have become convinced that the fulfillment of the Christian counselor's calling is significantly dependent on the counselor's willingness to journey with clients toward contemplation and mindfulness. The communal experience of *being with* will sharpen their loving knowledge of God and facilitate a keen sense of mindful existence, hospitality, and compassion toward themselves and others. The approach taken here goes beyond theory and techniques and is deeply personal in that it traces the journey I have taken toward a life of contemplation.