

Contemplative prayer

Elizabeth Harland shares her experience of a form of silent contemplative prayer and the impact of this on her being and counselling work

The CTJ conference 'Continuing the Journey 2010' provided me with a useful opportunity for reflection and inspired an idea that has continued to bear fruit. Spending some time in a small group between sessions at the conference and discussing in that group our reactions to events there, somehow enabled thoughts which were floating around to become crystallised. The group discussion acted as a catalyst, clarifying my understanding of how we were experiencing the conference. I remember that I found the moment for saying out loud an idea that was previously a nebulous, will-o-the-wisp, passing fancy which whispered to me and almost vanished. Once it was spoken, heard and received in a group of people for whom I felt respect, this idea became as real as concrete. Well, not quite that real: it still had to be approved by the ministry team back at home, in the parish church. It was in tune with the theory of Daniel Stern about human development, that giving voice to inner feelings and thoughts, and being heard, enables a child to grow in maturity. Something of the child in me found that to be true.

The idea was simple: start a group meeting for silent contemplative prayer. Why not? 'What a good idea, go for it!' said the five members of the ministry team. 'Well, that was easy,' I thought, and so the new Julian Meeting had a green light to begin.

It seemed wise to join the national network of groups, the Julian Meetings, (julianmeetings.org) of which I had some experience. This is a helpful umbrella organisation aiming to foster the practice of Christian contemplative prayer. Run by volunteers, at astonishingly low cost, they provided a starter-pack of publicity material, information and advice.

Following the JM principles, this new group is ecumenical, open to

people of all faiths or none, yet the focus is essentially Christ. The group, small in numbers, has been meeting monthly since September 2010.

The practice of silent contemplative prayer is something which I think might be helpful for other counsellors – it's a great way of praying without fear of breaching confidentiality! Also, it is therapy for the therapist. The motive for being there, however, is not to seek beneficial personal outcomes. It is simply to be; acknowledging by presence, a conscious awareness of the transcendent aspect of human nature in relationship with the Divine.

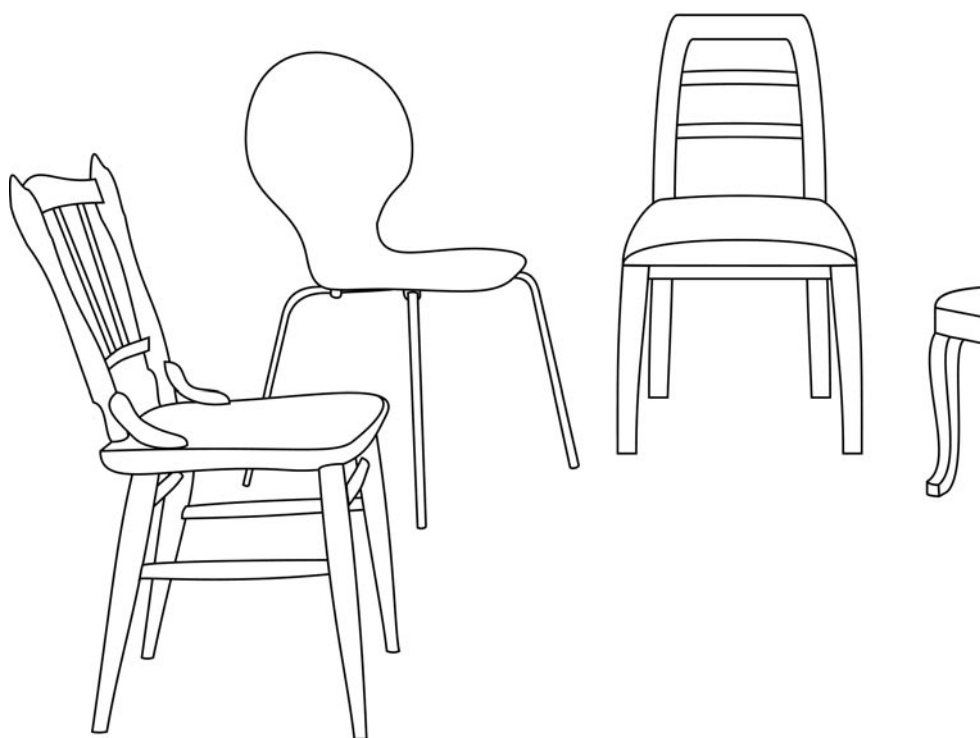
Stillness, silence, waiting attentively; this experience brings to me a sense of who I am, and strengthens all that is best in me. Potential seems to be released, peace emerges and inner conflict becomes calm. The silent prayer continues for a relatively short time, about 30 minutes. The lasting impression is of eternal benefit, beyond words. In contemplative prayer I am strengthened in resilience for my work

with clients and others, including myself, who present intractable and complex problems. Abounding in goodwill and joyful awareness of the positive experience in silent prayer, it seems impossible to be overwhelmed by issues. The 'wounded healer' becomes more able and more confident, with increased ability to listen empathically with clients.

Another aspect of the Julian Meeting is that by practising silent contemplative prayer in a group setting, a person is encouraged to develop their private practice of silent prayer as part of their regular personal routine.

One way of doing this is to use the well-known prayer from Orthodox Christianity, the Jesus Prayer: '*Lord Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*'

This prayer has been proved through centuries of use to be an effective tool in spiritual development. It can be repeated gently and softly as a mantra, taking a person more deeply into spiritual experience.



Another traditional way of using this tool effectively is to repeat the Jesus Prayer but each time focus mainly on the last phrase. After at least three repetitions, that last phrase is dropped and the next-to-last phrase becomes the focus. In this way a person begins by being focused on 'me, a sinner' and ends the prayer session by being focused on 'Lord Jesus'. This movement of focus is uplifting and takes the person out from themselves to the sense of Divine presence.

Reflecting on the therapeutic aspects of praying the Jesus Prayer, I have found that it brings about aspects of relating prayerfully that can be perceived as therapeutic, as in a counsellor/client relationship, approximately mirroring the five aspects of the therapeutic relationship described by Petruska Clarkson².

Lord Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Coming to begin contemplative prayer like a client with presenting problems, using the whole Jesus Prayer but with focus on this phrase 'a sinner', begins the therapeutic work by raising awareness of feelings of inner turmoil,

issues and things which have gone wrong. Feeling unable to help oneself, floundering, aware of being a person in need, yet coming to pray, using this phrase and remaining, still and attentive, is like forming a working alliance (with God).

Lord Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on me...

Who am I? Using the Jesus Prayer with special emphasis on this phrase encourages a developing sense of self. How real can I be? How authentic am I? Who am I when I am daring to wait upon the Divine presence? This aspect of relationship is like the transference/countertransference relationship. False or distorted aspects of myself gain perspective in the light of contemplative prayer. The genuine self, or as much of it as can be borne, is revealed, as awareness is gained of the intrusion of my own unfinished business onto the way I could be as a person.

Lord Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy...

Here the reparative work begins in earnest with awareness of the healing balm of forgiveness, both given and

lamb. The suffering of the world is terrible and it seems inevitable that innocent people suffer. We cannot escape this in our experience of life. Shared humanity means shared pain. Remaining with the prayer is like remaining with the client in their pain, acknowledging it, feeling it, being resilient and maintaining a sense of security, despite the wounds. If we can wait at the foot of the cross, we can wait with others in their pain. Sadly, brokenness in human experience is real; it is an authentic experience for all people. This is like the Real Relationship, the person-to-person relationship. As described by Brian Thorne, we can learn from experience of an encounter with the real Jesus, who was born and died, suffering, as a man³.

Lord Jesus...

Now using this phrase 'Lord Jesus' as the focus for the prayer, we are lifted up, back to the beginning of the prayer. We end where we first started. This time the focus is on the phrase, which gives an impression of transcendence; the Lord... the other-worldliness of Jesus, himself in his heavenly kingdom. Jesus becomes the light of the world, the light by which we can see and understand. There is no need for us to strive; all is completed. We can bask in the light, and rest in awareness of His presence. There is no need for us to be anxious; all will be well. The transpersonal aspect of the therapeutic relationship is beyond description. A sense of wonder and mystery prevails. A feeling of calm and a peaceful, quiet mind, remains as a gift given through the practice of silent contemplative prayer. ■

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References

- 1 www.continuingthejourney.com
- 2 Clarkson P. The therapeutic relationship. 2nd edition. London and Philadelphia: Whurr Publishers; 2003.
- 3 Thorne B. Behold the man. Revised edition. London: DLT; 2006.

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received; mercy flows and a sense of being loved with an infinite love. The gift of new life, a spiritual rebirth, is accessible through faith and simple trust. Hope is restored. The possibility of change becomes real. New potential as a person emerges, with a new sense of self. This seems to me to be like the Reparative Relationship between counsellor/client. The unconditional positive regard of Carl Rogers in person-centred counselling is experienced in a spiritual dimension.

Lord Jesus, Lamb of God...

This phrase of the Jesus Prayer is a reminder of the suffering of Jesus as a man on the cross; as the sacrificial