

MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT

By

DIANA MAHABIR WYATT

Introduction

A year ago, when Sr. Paul asked me to do this paper, I plunged into a course of study, starting with the collected works of Thomas Merton, the great Cistercian mystic monk, who has been an inspiration for so many people. From him the journey took me in many, often surprising directions, but all, I eventually realized, with one underlying theme. I struggled hard with Thomas Merton, alternately soaking in his words, pondering on them for days, and internally raging against him for months on end. Finally, I realized that I had been wrestling with myself, and the reflections in his journey to his faith and his mysterious death that drew me were the reflections that so many of us, from St. Augustine and St. Francis to many of us here today, share in our own journeys. I used to think that I was the only one that struggled with doubts about God and the nature of the teachings of Christianity and the other great religious scriptures, and often felt very lonely and excluded in those doubts as at our weekly meetings everyone seemed more confident than I was, more centered in their unquestioning and unshakeable religious beliefs.

I had doubts and struggles and deep cries of despair in ever being able to contemplate, much less understand or even approach an understanding of The Ultimate Reality, the Source of Energy from which we all arise. Thomas Merton, like St. Augustine, like many of us, me included, did not arise from an ascetic or contemplative life; he walked through the world on his journey toward God. He immersed himself in the life of the body. He immersed himself in the life of the mind (at which I found him most infuriating) and he immersed himself, finally in the life of the spirit, coming eventually, as did my personal hero, Teilhard de Chardin, to the understanding that “all of us are interconnected, all belief is interconnected, all that exists, animate and inanimate is interconnected”, and he died in that

belief, in the far east, talking to Buddhist monks in deep interconnected communion of spirit.

It was, therefore, an ease to my never ending struggle with faith to know that even at the end of his life Teilhard de Chardin, as close to a saint as I will ever get, still experienced the lonely anguish of his own spiritual struggle, as did, touchingly, Mother Theresa, and Thomas Merton.

The paper before you reflects, somewhat inadequately, the milestones in the year's work, and is entitled Mind, Body and Spirit, to reflect the experience of incarnation and interconnectedness. I know many of us, rigorously trained in the Newtonian pattern of thinking, find meditation hard to accept or understand, so I was led on a different route, to an approach to understanding the experience of centering prayer and contemplative meditation that I hope will be useful to others.

1. The milestones marking today's reflection of that journey are :
 - a. Some basics about centering prayer...some of us here have been into it for years, some of us are new, some of us are, after many years still tackling it anew each time ...all of us can use a new look at what we are doing from time to time...
 - b. A lay person's guide to quantum physics which brings us closer to God, and to each other, than science has ever done in the past, simply confirming what Father Keating and Thomas Merton were saying years ago, but most of us didn't have the ears to hear.
 - c. A glimpse at some new discoveries in neurobiology, and how they relate to meditation and centering prayer, and how they reveal to us God's abiding care and love for us.
 - d. A touching insight from the Vatican State Astronomer about the mystery and wonder of the larger universe around us.
 - e. The gift of Outrageous Joy that is ours to give to God.

(a) Some Basics about Centering Prayer

Milestone One: What is there new to look at in Centering Prayer? We all have been taught the method, and Sister Paul has reminded us of it here this morning. I would suggest, however that there may be a couple of things that have to be inwardly checked and re-checked as we go along - like taking your own temperature to see if it is normal.

These include the use of the “Sacred Word”, the question of “intent” and what we mean by “centering” and “surrender”.

We know that Centering Prayer, unlike other forms of meditative practice, is not a concentrative method...we do not concentrate on our sacred word as though it were a mantra to be repeated over and over. In fact, using the sacred word in that way can slow down the positive effects of Centering Prayer. In Centering Prayer we do not fight consciousness by concentrating on the Sacred Word. Even if you are not aware of it, your thoughts vanish of themselves, letting you rest in your inner silence...even if it is for a nanosecond. It is only when you realize that you are once again thinking, that you have come out of that silence, you again have the chance, as Father Keating says, to practice surrendering to God.

The second self-check is in our conception of what “intent” is. Most of us intend always what is the best for our spiritual growth, but the intention of Centering Prayer is a little different. It is simply the intention to be completely utterly and absolutely open to God. It is something most of us have not done since the first few months of our lives...be completely open to someone else...from the first time we cried out hungry and no one was there right away to feed and comfort us. We don't know what will happen when we open ourselves completely to God, but that is what Centering Prayer asks of us...simply the intention to be that naked, that open, that vulnerable and unguarded.

The third self-check is to understand what we mean by “surrender”. For many people it means giving up what we have, giving up our time and our conscious thought in order to gain something greater...a spiritual insight, a

closeness to God's presence, but I do not think this is the kind of surrender we are practicing in Centering Prayer. In Centering Prayer, we are surrendering without expectation, *without hope for anything*. We are just surrendering to God "for so."

The fourth self-check is what we mean by "centering". We do it unselfconsciously at the sound of Sr. Paul's voice saying: "Take a deep breath. Center yourself..." and we focus on our 'center of balance' instinctively. It usually is about two inches below our navel, and enables us to use natural forces of gravity to keep our minds and bodies in alignment.

So much for definitions of the basics.

(b) Quantum Physics for Dummies

The second milestone on today's journey is the unusual one of **Quantum Physics for Dummies**.

I have to approach this from a classic "Dummies" angle, as I am not a scientist, and my understanding of the Theory of Chaos, String Theory and Quantum Physics (or Quantum Theory or Quantum Mechanics, the terms are used interchangeably) has been gained from slow and fascinated study of books that have come my way, internet searches and long and longing discussions with people who make a profession of such things. I am sure there are many people here today who know far more than I do of these things and hope you will be generous enough to correct my mistakes as I go along.

Briefly, quantum mechanics measures small packets of energy called "quanta" which can be measured by 'waves', like light waves or electromagnetic waves which exist at the atomic and sub-atomic levels...in other words, what we, and all of the world we live in exists of, and a lot we don't exist of, but which exists around us. People like Einstein and Max Plank and Heisenberg, Schrödinger and Neils Bohr to name a few well-known names all worked on establishing the basics and doing research at this level. Apart from the wave theory and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which

freed the scientific world from the prison of Newtonian Physics with its rigid rules and formulae, they discovered the theory of relativity and that of “quantum entanglement”. I’m not even going to begin to get into definition of these very complex and fascinating theories which are central to the work of 21st century research in physics in academic and medical research laboratories around the world, except to say that the last mentioned of these, intricately bound up with the rest is the theory that when you observe something, the very act of that observation changes both the thing observed and the observer.

There is an interaction which exists at the wave level, in other words for every one of our actions, even such a benign one as paying attention to something, the more attention you give to something you resent or hate, the stronger you make it. (This is a lesson for those who brood on political figures they dislike intensely). The more attention you give to something you love or admire, the more the positive vibrations you generate affect it. Those of you who attended Justice Peter Jamadar’s session on Dr.Mikimo Esuma’s research into what happens to water particles when you send waves of either anger or love towards them will not be surprised at this, or those of you who attended Dr. Pooransingh’s session on stress management.

What I am trying to get across here is the connection between Centering Prayer and the scientific proof that how we interact with anything that is composed of these waves of energy, which is virtually everything, seen and unseen and “the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven”, for all we know, is affected by everything else. The trust and love involved in opening yourself and surrendering yourself to God affects you on a very deep level, and it affects the environment that you carry around you. It is also going to affect the way you interact with other people because you have consented to “the presence and action of God within you”. You knew from experience that it happened. What I am trying to do, for the scientific minded and the curious among us, is to explain the “how” it happens. It is a perfectly natural process, explainable by physics. As most of God’s miracles are.

John Donne, the 17th century poet, was a passionate man who lived his life to the fullest. He was a poet, a priest and a passionate lover. He was also the philosopher who, in talking about the Christian Church included *everyone...all human beings, whatever their faith...in its embrace.*

He reminds me of a Hindu pundit who invited me to take part in a puja at a function at which I was present. When I hesitated, asking him if it would matter that I was not a Hindu, he smilingly replied that, in his faith, everyone was born a Hindu; some people just didn't realize it yet...an attitude of generosity and inclusion that echoed the famous remarks made by John Donne who, when he lay dangerously ill and heard the knolling of the church bells for a parishioner who had already died, responded to a query about who the bells were ringing for, by saying: "The Church is Catholic, Universal, so are all of her actions. All that she does belongs to all...Who bends not his ear to any bell which on any occasion rings, but who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world. No man is an island, entire of himself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee."

Father Thomas Merton, the famous Cistercian monk and author, wrote a book entitled "No Man is an Island" in which he said virtually the same thing...that God excludes no one from His love. There is no exclusivity to spiritual realization, although there may be to religion. Each person finds her or his way to God in their own way, depending on when and where they were born, how they were socialized, what their parents believed or did not believe; what opportunities they were given in life. He was an extra-ordinary man, who, like the world famous Jesuit Anthropologist, Father Teilhard de Chardin, whose research the scientific community is only now beginning to appreciate and understand, as the electronic age and quantum mechanics gives tangible evidence of what he called "the noosphere", struggled with deep spiritual doubts all his life while never ceasing from his spiritual journey. I truly believe that this attitude of inclusion is indicative of true spirituality. It is also a fore sight into what science now tells us is true, insofar as we are composed of matter and spirit, both of which are composed of waves of energy moving at different speeds, as is our entire world. We, and our environment, are all part of each other, and how we interact with each other and our environment affects our own bodies and spirits as it affects those of the person we interact with.

There is a sound reason, anthropologically, for courtesy, cleanliness and good manners. They have secured the survival of those who have learned

and used them throughout the centuries, just as the survival of those societies whose religious teachings were based on love and tolerance have survived.

It is fashionable in some circles these days, to point at Islamic Fundamentalists as being the ones who preach intolerance and hate, ignoring the Fundamentalist Sons of Kali and the Christian Fundamentalists who not only preach intolerance and hate, but exclude even their own sons and daughters from their families if they do not join them at Mass or their version of it. There is a progression, and at the extreme end of all sets of religious fundamentalism when adherents have the means and the power, they send tanks, suicide bombers and missiles to show they are in the right and only they and their beliefs must be respected; or they send their sons to kill their daughters who have fallen in love with a stranger. How many of us here have excluded other people from our lives because they believed differently than we do? Ask not for whom the bell tolls. Any of us who can honestly admit that we have also committed an act of spiritual terrorism. Do any of us dare exempt ourselves? But we are all made of the same stuff spiritually, mentally and physically, and to exclude others is an illusion, for it is not possible. We are all made of the same stuff and are interacting spiritually as well as mentally and even physically whether we want to admit it or not.

© Neurobiology

And so to yet another branch of science: Neurophysics or perhaps it should be more accurately called “**neurobiology**”, or as a few researchers have daringly gone where no researcher has ever gone before: “**neurotheology**”. What is happening is that science is now discovering what ordinary people have known for centuries: the miracle of God’s gift to us in creating not only who we are and what we can do, but even a pathway straight to Him.

Very recent research has indicated the capacity of the cerebral cortex to produce new synaptic connections indefinitely throughout our lifetimes, not, as once was thought, only up till the age of 18. The forebrain stops growing, generally, around then, but the ability to form new connections can continue indefinitely. We all have the ability, even in our eighties to learn and change and come to new spiritual and mental understanding, as indeed, did Thomas Merton and Teilhard de Chardin.

Most people around 18 have enough neural connections to cope for the rest of their lives. We would have developed all the necessary response patterns to the environment and to interpersonal and emotional situations we are likely to meet. But so many new things are happening, so much new information is now available about the world and the nature of reality that we cannot afford to rely on thought patterns established when we were eighteen...often inherited from parents who learned theirs by the time they were eighteen, and neither they nor we have re-examined them in light of the knowledge now available to us. (I think here of the effects of corporal punishment on children's psycho-neurological development, for example, but there are hundreds of things that apply here from forms of political organization to sexual orientation to gender roles to cloning to the possibility of communicating with intergalactic, non carbon-based life-forms). However old we are, we can learn and we can adapt to that learning and learn new ways to act believe and behave.

Last year, UWI hosted a lecture from the Harvard professor and researcher, Professor Howard Gardiner, whose work on Multiple Intelligences was felt to be essential to the way in which generations of people in the Caribbean have been educated and socialized. Caribbean researchers have long recognised our cultural propensity to tolerate corruption, violence as a means of solving problems, and poor leadership in political life, in business life, in religious and family life, and as befits their responsibility as academics, want to do something about it. Hence the presence of Professor Gardiner whose work on intelligence has turned around the way people around the world learn, think and create. Hopefully, if we can learn something from science about the way we think, we can learn new ways of thinking and therefore behaving. Each of us.

What he told us is that we do not have simply one kind of intelligence the old IQ standard against which all should be evaluated, but that there are at least nine different kinds of intelligence and that we can be adept at one or more of these and each has a value to add to society. Each intelligence has a different way of learning and processing information. (So much for the academic achievers that have dominated the status peaks for so long). These are:

1. **Verbal-Linguistic** Learning through language, the ability to use language to communicate - like writers, T.V announcers etc.
2. **Logical-Mathematical** Learning through orderly processes like scientists, mathematicians and detectives.

Comment: these two are the ones nearly all our educational systems and other institutions, business, services, religions, government systems etc are based on...but these are only two of the nine. *The others we have not been building into our value systems*

3. **Visual-Spatial** Learning through manipulating mental images or building models like artists, sculptors, architects and sailors.
4. **Bodily kinesthetic** Using one's body to solve problems or Communicate like dancers, soccer players, athletes, surgeons and craftspeople. Many of these people may learn best through simulations, practice, role-play and actual experience.
5. **Musical-Learning** through rhythm, dance and melodies, calypso, steel pan, folk songs, (a child singing ABCEDFG...?)
6. **Interpersonal-Ability** to interact well with others and learning through interacting with others, like teachers, actors or politicians.
7. **Intrapersonal Ability** to understand oneself, and to manage one's thoughts and feelings. Learning through reflection. Examples are psychotherapists and philosophers.
8. **Naturalist- Learning** through recognizing patterns in nature, classifying and interacting with plants and animals like nature guides, botanists, ecologists and agriculturalists
9. **Existential** Talent for grappling with big questions like the meaning of life and death as well as sensitivity to spiritual dimensions.

Other researchers suggest that **Spiritual Intelligence** may be a separate category. Among these is Dr. Danah Zohar a professor of Quantum Physics

of Oxford University, who, together with Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist Dr Ian Marshall has pioneered the revolutionary work on Spiritual Intelligence. IQ, they say deals with thoughts, EQ deals with feelings and SQ deals with meaning. And Spiritual Intelligence is what is developed through Centering Prayer and contemplative meditation... making those synaptic connections in the brain between thought, experience and what it all means. It is not done by thought or by experience, but by spiritual growth and development. It is not necessarily connected to religion...some religious people have very little SQ. Some do. Some people with high levels of Spiritual Intelligence have no overt connection with religion at all. But their lives are full of meaning and transcendence.

There is new evidence and new research that backs up their work.

In 1997 Professor V.S. Ramchandran , Director of the Center for Brain and Cognition at the University of California, San Diego, and Canadian Neuro-Psychologist Dr. Michael Persinger began work on a new area of brain research. The years since have validated the research done by Persinger and Ramcharindnan, which has shown that electro-magnetic stimulation of a mass in the brain just inside the temporal lobe of the brain in the neo-cortex, produces spiritual experiences, feelings of transcendence, and thoughts of God in people who have no religious leanings at all. It is called the God Module, or the God Spot. It appears that just as God, in his wisdom, gave us eyes with which to see his works, ears with which to hear their song, both of which have their corresponding areas in the brain which act as the mechanisms through which these miracles are accomplished, He also gave us a mechanism in our brains through which he insured that we would find Him spiritually as well.

The Bishop of Oxford has been often quoted on his reaction to the furore resulting from the publication of this research as asking, “Why would anyone be surprised?” God wants us to know Him and He has given us the means with which to do so. It doesn’t quite tally with what we, or our parents learned at eighteen, but we weren’t eighteen in 1997 or 2005, when the research was published.

(d) The Mystery and Wonder of the Universe

A wonderful little book called “Intelligent Life in the Universe” was published late last year by the Vatican publishers, written by Br. Guy Consolmagno. The Vatican State Astronomer, was looking at the search for extra-terrestrial life in the universe, looking at the vastness of the universe as our as yet limited scientists know it, but as that knowledge grows daily with the discovery of black holes and quarks and quasars. He comments “Appreciating God as the creator of a universe big enough to contain those billions and billions of galaxies and stars makes us realize just how immense God’s infinity must be.”

At the same time, scientists examining the nature of just this tiny planet are discovering immense new infinities which they call “intelligent” in each molecule that we are made of (the implications of that for how we respect and look after our physical bodies and our spiritual welfare and the way we interact and therefore mutually affect those around us are profound, for bodies and spirits interact and intermingle for they also have measurable wave lengths all of which were made and designed by God)...immensities outside and immensities within...and all created by God, more wonderful than we know and perhaps more wonderful than we can know. *“The most important thing to realize is that our own understanding is always incomplete. It is crazy to underestimate God’s ability to create in depths of ways that we will never understand. It is equally dangerous to think that we understand God completely.”*

So what do we mean by “intelligent”? And what do we mean by “life”? If there is intelligent life other than that we recognize looking around this room, would we recognize it if we saw it? Is it as precious to God as we believe that we are? The Bible itself speaks of angels capable of good and evil apparently as well as “all the heavenly beings” several times in Psalms. Did Jesus come to bring light to all these life forms or just ours out of the billions and billions that He made? The answer Brother Consolmagno gives us is, “We just don’t know”. We will never know. Not in our lifetimes. But we do know that the possibility exists that there are life-forms other than ourselves, made by God.

And so , we must accept that we can never know the nature of God, and it would be presumptuous of us , with our limited apparatus for sensing and understanding the **Ultimate Reality**, (as Father Keating , and the Dalai Lama and the present Pope have termed the Being that is God), to even pretend that we can. If God is ALL of what exists, and ALL is a scarifying huge concept, consisting of radio and other waves going through us right now that we cannot pick up, colours and light waves going through this room that we do not have the capacity to perceive because as mere human beings, none of us have the apparatus to receive it, alternate realities co-existing with ours that quantum physics only barely can approach the perception of as yet...if all of this is God...of which we can have no more awareness than a butterfly can be aware of the programming of a computer what else can we do but surrender to the immensity of It and trust in the rightness of the design, however it affects us personally?

If we truly agree to surrender to God, as we do in Centering Prayer, we surrender to **all** of God's universe, the known and the unknown accepting that most of it is unknown and will always be unknown. This demands more than an act of faith. It demands an acceptance and a leap, even where there are agonizing doubts, where faith is not yet present and may never be.

In many of the Psalms we read before our Centering Prayer sessions there are the words "co-create". My favourite is Psalm 119 which says: "Great peace have those who co-create with you, who share the living wine of your Spirit. They know that all goodness comes from Your Divine Love, the Source and Foundation of all life."

Let us try a short guided meditation:

Close your eyes; get comfortable in your chair and breathe slowly and deeply, in and out. Slowly and deeply. Feel your chest rise and fall and relax into the rhythm of your breathing.

Find your self relaxing on a hammock or some soft cushions near a beach or near the sea. You can feel the sun on your face and a breeze is ruffling your hair gently. You can hear the sound of the wind stirring the leaves of the trees overhead, and rustling softly through the grass next to you. The sound

of the waves is regular and rhythmic and overhead you can hear birds calling to each other and just warbling in joy of being alive.

Now shift your consciousness just a little and feel the sun on your face and realize that it is God touching your face gently through the waves of light and heat He has created for this purpose. Feel the wind and realize that it is God tenderly touching your hair through the waves He has created for this purpose. Hear the leaves above and the grass next to you rustle softly and realize that they are God's voice whispering to you through the life he has put into them, for they live, too. Hear the waves pound on the shore and know that the sound waves are God's waves of vibration reaching out to respond to the vibrations of your own heart beat. Feel God breathing life into your lungs and out again, God's breath breathing through you. God is within you and God is without you.

Shift your consciousness a little bit more and feel that you are the sun shining down on the sea and the grass and the trees. Feel yourself giving nourishment to them. Now feel that you are the waves of the breeze ruffling through the grass and the leaves. Feel them move as you touch them. Now shift a little more and feel that you are the trees and the grass soaking up the goodness from the sun and the oxygen from the breeze and nourishment from the earth. Feel that you are part of all of life, all of creation, vibrating with all there is in perfect harmony.

Now feel that you are back inside this room, sitting with your eyes closed, breathing in slowly and breathing out slowly. Keep you eyes closed and be aware of the breathing of other people around you, God's breath breathing in and out through them and feel God's presence all around you, in you and in everyone else here, in the sun and the trees and the soft rain and the birds and the trees running with life.

Very slowly open your eyes and walk with God in you and around you for the rest of the day.

(e) Outrageous Joy

And last of all what does God want from us?

As Brother Cosmolmagno says "We don't know."

We don't know.

How about Outrageous Joy? As a gift of gratitude and praise for the wonders that day after day are brought to us by science and by faith? What is the greatest gift a child of any age can give a loving parent who has given them everything they have? May I suggest the gift of Joy? Outrageous joy? Thank you for all the abundance you have bestowed? Let us all rejoice? In the Bible the word “Joy or rejoice appear a thousand times. The words” weep” and “repent” maybe a hundred. Which, as a parent do you want from your beloved children? Misery and tears? Complaints about life and what it is not? Or Joy at what they have? Happiness and fulfillment? You’ve sinned and asked forgiveness? OK. You are forgiven. As Father Keating says “let go”. Don’t you trust in God’s forgiveness? Do you have to drag it up every day? How about some positive joyous vibes to make the world dance?

Each attitude, each projection goes forth in Quanta, the waves which project the reality of feelings, emotions, bodies and, heat, light and wind, which God gives to us as life and light and love, and which we have the capacity to give back to him. As Marguerite Bourgeault says: “Contemplative Prayer is first and foremost an act of worship; an offering of the prayer of self-disclosure and inner surrender on behalf of the world.” As we have seen, we have the ability and the capacity at any age to develop spiritual intelligence, and thereby to change the world by interacting with it. Each of us.

We cannot pretend to understand what God is or wants, but as parents we can understand the nearest, perhaps that humans can come to. I love my children and my grandchildren desperately, faults, foibles and all, as I must believe is but a small simulacrum of how God loves me. I know as I want my children to be filled with joy not because they have everything they want but because they are so happy with what they already have, and the greatest gift they can give me is their happiness, so as a child of God I will try to send, as my gift in return, waves of outrageous joy to enrich the world.

Are we ready?

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