Tuesday Lent Week Four

Attention is a like a muscle. If you don’t use it – or just imagine you are exercising while in fact you are not – it will atrophy. People who have an accident and are laid up in bed for an extended time say how quickly their muscles weaken. When they are able to get up at last, they find they can’t do the most ordinary things without great difficulty. The road back to mobility and health may be a long one and will certainly require regular exercise.

In our (at least until Corona) overloaded and distracted culture we can be so distracted that we don’t even know we are distracted. This state may last until we try to pay attention to something new and unwelcome such as a global crisis. It flies off the news sites into our families and daily lives as an inescapable disruption. The global invades the personal. The disaster movie we watched for entertainment becomes a chilling reality in urban lockdown, deserted streets and customers fighting for hand sanitisers. Who wants to pay attention to something as unpleasant as that?

Becoming obsessed with something – whether pleasant or distasteful – is not the same as paying attention. To be merely addicted or fixated is an extreme form of compulsive distraction. So, we may be glued to news updates during the day, most of which contain nothing new. Better to ration our intake of news. Stay in touch, keep informed but don’t binge as we do with most of the distractions we use to distract us from distraction.

We exercise a physical muscle by alternating contraction and release. Tighten, let go, tighten, let go. Gradually it becomes stronger and we can do more things with it. Similarly, with the muscle of attention, we find we are becoming more attentive in more and more aspects of our lives – to the people we are with, to our immediate environment, to the simple miracles of life – birdsong, cloud formations, the greening of the trees. These are not distractions, but they give us the variety of content we need to keep our minds healthily flexible, receptive and focused.

Attention that can’t remain on an object for long enough for us to appreciate it for itself – not just for what it gives *me* – slackens into distraction. It flits from sensation to sensation or endless browsing. Attention can focus and enjoy for the sake of delight or relationship; it can move across a spectrum of consciousness calmly. We move from thing to thing without panic or chaos. The variety is healthy and nutritious.

So, during these days when life has changed for us all, meditation is a great, simple, available way to rebuild our power of attention. Not that we sit and meditate 24 hours a day. But we build in the set times and find we can live in-between these times with more peace and appreciation of the beauty around us – and within us. Attention without a thought or image is pure prayer. But exercising it like this, at meditation times, means we can think, read, look, listen, touch and smell, the rest of the time, in a truly prayerful way.

Wednesday Lent Week Four

In our community worldwide we are working together to offer a **‘contemplative path through the crisis’**. As you will have seen from our website or other mailings you have received from the community, we will be proposing a healthy variety of resources and events from which you can select whatever you find helpful to you personally or to your family, or to a group that you may be meditating with online.

If you belong to a regular meditation group and are missing it because it’s suspended, think about meeting together online at the same regular time. It’s not hard to set up and you can get simple advice if you’re technologically challenged. There’s a large list of online groups already meeting you can select from as well.

This Path has already begun with an online series of ‘inter-contemplative dialogues’ between Alan Wallace, an old friend, and a well-known Buddhist teacher and myself with Eva Natanya, a Catholic Buddhist scholar and myself. I will be sitting in the library at Bonnevaux with some of our community here. He and Eva will be sitting in a Carmelite monastery in Colorado. And you will be wherever you are. We will all be in the same moment, paying attention together. Each session will conclude with a meditation session. We will be together then in the one place that unites us all through the dimensions of time and space. These conversations will be posted online after their live transmission. We will be celebrating a contemplative mass on Sunday.

All the updates for this path will be posted on our website which will be your one-stop point of call:

**www.wccm.org**

Many of the teachers in the World Community will be involved in making and contributing to this Contemplative Path. And I invite you to contribute your ideas and suggestions of what you feel would be useful and nourishing.

Quite regularly, but not overloading you with choice, we will be updating resources and events that you might find helpful in order to follow a contemplative path through this difficult, anxious and, for many, lonely time. We have all heard that the Chinese word for ‘crisis’ means both danger *and* opportunity. I hope this Contemplative Path will help make the opportunity clearer and easier to grasp.

The essential purpose of all this is to strengthen your daily practice of the muscle of attention - which is *pure prayer*. Petitionary and intercessory prayer are authentic forms and we need these too. Just as we benefit, too, from worshipping together. But it is pure prayer, the prayer of the heart - that is not ‘mine’ alone but my entry into the one, unifying prayer of the Spirit - that is most potent and transformative. Change your heart and you have already begun to change the world.

Thursday Lent Week Four

Our Coronavirus crisis will last longer than Lent. But it adds an urgent, personal dimension to the main themes of this spiritual season. We looked at these after Lent began but perhaps now, they seem more existential, less merely spiritual. Or, putting it another way, we are discovering that the spiritual is not as abstract as we often assume and that life itself is a spiritual journey that brings together every aspect and kind of human experience. When we forget this, we forget a core element of our humanity. We risk becoming not only spiritually undernourished but less than human.

I was shocked recently to receive a letter to the Virus from a twenty-year-old. I won’t quote from it because it could be upsetting to those who have lost friends to the virus or are deeply concerned for their loved ones and themselves. It was a letter of thanks, provocatively and intelligently written but, as one might expect from an intense young person, lacking as yet a full empathy for others who suffer. The letter painfully saw the crisis as a wake-up call, and the indictment of an unsustainable lifestyle.

As I said the other day, this is not a time merely for blaming and finger-pointing, even at ourselves. But there is a teaching hidden in this crisis and if we can find it, we will recognise the opportunity for change it offers. The terrible suffering and death-toll by the end will not be justified but will be part of this hard-to-swallow meaning. For anyone alive at this time, whatever their generation, whether they were infected or not, the world will never be the same. The human family will be weaker, and recovery will difficult. In such times the dark forces of politics and finance may seek to take advantage and it will never be more important to have a critical mass of people in whom the contemplative mind has awakened. Not heroes or saints but human beings who have recovered the spiritual dimension of reality, so often missing, ridiculed, neglected, rejected or trivialised in our present culture.

When we put spirituality into another category, or reduce it materialistically to neurons and myths, we begin the process of dehumanising humanity. Peace is sought by force, wealth is stockpiled by the few, political structures are hijacked, and religion becomes merely another personal identity or an aggressive ideology.

Even if it wasn’t expressed perfectly, the young person who wrote the letter understood well that we are not just facing a human crisis of suffering that requires compassion and action, but also an opportunity to live better. Opportunities can be more challenging than failures. John Main once asked me as I began this path if I was prepared for all it would bring. I thought he meant what I would be giving up. But he corrected me: ‘I mean the joy.’ Etty Hillesum wrote, as she was helping the Jews being rounded up by the Nazis for shipment to Auschwitz, “Today I feel total despair. I will have to deal with it’.

We are now in the days of the spring equinox, the most powerful force of resurrection in nature. It is the right time for us to deal with joy.