

Going to Evagrius Ponticus for Spiritual Direction

A Spiritual Direction Session with a Fourth Century Desert Father by a Contemporary Seeker

Father Evagrius (FE): Welcome, you have come a long way.

Twentieth First Century Seeker(TS): Yes, thank you for being willing to see me.

FE: There is little difference between traveling across centuries and traveling across the desert in the 300s. I am glad you are here. What brings you?

TS: I come because I would like to follow the Way taught by the man from Nazareth, but I have not found a teacher to help me in my time.

FE: Yes, we all need teachers. The journey is one we must all do alone, but we cannot do it by ourselves. Is what developed into the church in your time not helpful?

TS: Well, you would think it would be, but they focus on reciting these creeds that do not make sense and creating this social structure that excludes the marginalized like me and despite great gains in the understanding of personality in my century, there is scant attention to the obstacles of personality in following the Way.

FE: Ha! Ha! [merry smile]. Who would have thought that in the fourth century we would know about the importance of understanding the personality blocks to following a spiritual path, while centuries later, when those paths are even better known, little attention is given to them by churches that purport to teach the Way.

TS: Modern psychology perhaps has much to offer but there is a great chasm between its understanding and traditional teachers of spiritual growth. Except for a few teachers, like A. H. Almaas, teaching about how the personality can block spiritual growth doesn't occur.

FE: [eyes twinkling] We in the desert would describe that as trying to farm without a hoe. If you can't deal with the weeds of personality, it is difficult to grow anything.

TS: I have always thought that Paul made the problem rather clear when he talked about wanting to do one thing and instead doing another. He seems to be describing how the personality's defense system intervenes automatically in our choices, if we have not learned how to be attuned to its operation.

FE: You are quite right. We call the energy of these automatic assertions by the personality demons. This term rightly describes the unmanageable energy when an awareness of these patterns is kept out of consciousness. But, yes, I have mapped these patterns out and all who come to this monastery in the desert to find God must first find

which one of the nine paths of personality development is theirs and what the nature of their personality blocks are.

TS: Yes, today we call the understanding, which you first developed about each of the nine divine gifts and the personality blocks of each of the nine patterns, the Enneagram. Some teachers are beginning to teach this spiritual tool, and I have been taught enough that I know my personality type and its divine gift and how the energy of the defensive structure of the personality blocks that gift, but there are no spiritual teachers who are taking me further.

FE: Hmmm. Do you have contemplative practices in your life? These practices are designed to free up the psychic space so you can see the pattern of your personality but these practices. In addition, contemplative practices enlarge the inner space for us to access the realization that we are already deeply connected to the divine pattern we call God.

TS: I have begun a Centering Prayer practice. Should that help?

FE: Yes, stick with that and come back and see me in five years.

TS: What! I have trekked across the centuries. That may be wonderful advice, but can you give me more understanding now of how to make this journey of the Way.

FE: I don't know that I can. You see your understanding of the journey to God is all in your head. You want head advice. It is good that your head is aware of your desire for God, but before you can deeply begin the journey you must get more in your heart and body. A few years of Centering Prayer should help that.

TS: Isn't there more that I can do right now, than try to understand my personality blocks and develop my Centering Prayer practice?

FE: Tell me what is your prayer life like now.

TS: I pray to God all the time. I have a number of favorite prayers to entreat God to be with me. I read the Bible almost every day and reflect on my readings.

FE: Interesting. You see at this monastery we do not pray to God, we pray from within God. You can never be separate from God, except in your mind. God is relationality itself, that is what the Trinity is all about.

TS: Don't think I have ever been taught this way of understanding my relationship with God.

FE: From your reading of the Scriptures, do you remember the test that Paul gave followers of the Way? It is at 2Corinthians 13:5-6—"Examine yourselves to make sure

you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you acknowledge that Jesus Christ is really in you? If not you have failed the test.”

TS: What test does Paul mean?

FE: God must first be revealed in you before you can recognize God outside of yourself.

TS: So, this is why you said work on Centering Prayer for five years and then come back. You want me to use Centering Prayer as a way to open up enough internal psychic space to find God first of all within me?

FE: If all your internal space is taken up by your unexamined personality patterns operating while you are watching sports and trying to get ahead in your workplace, there will be little space for God to reveal himself to you.

TS: Oh my this is going to take a lot of time.

FE: What is your hurry? Time, eternity is on your side.

TS: That is a radically different perspective from what people in the twenty-first century believe.

FE: [shrugs his shoulders] Remember you said earlier you are caught in the grasp of your own personality, and as Paul described do one thing when you want to do another. You must clear a space where you are aware of God within you so that you can be aware of God doing through you what you cannot do yourself. That might be reaching out to the gay, refugee from another tribe or anything else your ordinary self might not think of doing. Once you know that God is within you, then you can experience God doing good things through you that you would never have done yourself. It is the exact reverse of the problem you first quoted Paul as describing.

TS: [look of amazement] Is this really possible?

FE: [smiles] Absolutely. All you have to do is develop sufficient awareness of your personality patterns, so you can be at choice about them not running the show, and quiet the mind sufficiently with your Centering Prayer practice so that you can be lead to live from your heart where you know God has your back. Then you can allow yourself to become increasingly vulnerable to the world because it is not you but God acting through you. You don't have to worry about figuring out things or how to handle situations that use to baffle you, all you need is to be fully present and open so that God's love can manifest through you into what is the next right action. This is what is called living a life that is energized by your Christian faith, not some abstract belief system that is recited but not lived.

TS: I think I understand, but it seems like a tall order from the perspective of the twenty-first century. Do you have anything I could take back with me about what it

means for a Christian to lead a life of faith, a life not sourced or energized from one's own ego self sufficiency, but from connection with God within?

FE: Remember that head knowledge is not going to get you out of the starting block, but if you insist hand me that scroll over there. Here is what several of the young monks wrote down as what it means to live from a life of faith:

- to commit to letting our life be guided by love (God), recognizing that the ability to love and to know what love asks in any situation, increases as our level of consciousness and freedom from our own ego (false self) increases
- to recognize that we are children of God (our Creator) and that this life is a gift and that love and its daughters, peace, justice, truth, beauty are all expressions of this relationality
- to seek to have a personal path of exploration of how to increasingly give and receive love and be directed by love (God), that is a path of intimacy with God, recognizing an embodiment of divine love is seen in Jesus and other love-enlightened beings
- to surrender our life to the divine, that is to an energy of love in the world that is greater than we are and comes from the relationality of all things
- to acknowledge that our life is about more than just us; that the success of others are also our successes, that the suffering of others is also our suffering
- to grow up emotionally recognizing that our ability to love and to receive love increases as we are less and less controlled by the unconscious patterns of our ego that seeks power and control, esteem and affection and security and survival (the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness) or as Father Keating says in the twenty-twenty-first century to give up our ego's program for happiness
- to deepen our experience of relationality by being part of a faith community and by being accountable to others for showing up and supporting their lives and being vulnerable to let them show up and support us
- to be a part of outreach and service to others not based on the ego's needs of asserting its will about what is right or wrong (or our false self's need for approval or esteem), or based on an unconscious helping that presupposes an inequality in helper and helpee, but based on energy arising from an inner experience of love that guides and requires humble right action to relieve suffering in the world
- to participate regularly in sacred ritual to bring self and others out of our ordinary perception into the larger perception of gratitude for life in the moment.
- to lead a life of joy and celebration at the marvel of being alive, which celebrates being a child of creation itself (a child of God) and the abundance life offers
- to be aware that we always only have partial knowing and to always remain open to continual learning from Jesus' example and teachings and other Christian and wisdom traditions
- to accept that the arc of history is long, but is grounded in God and the continual evolution of matter and spirit, and so we remain optimistic and hopeful, though not pollyannaish, and approach each day with a willingness to be vulnerable to whatever life (God in the particular) asks.
- to recognize that our faith and our world are a part of the creative nature of God as shown in new and restored relationships, the world around us and the ever evolving

revelations of science in understanding our world, and in the evolving of our own understanding of Scripture and faith, and that all of these demonstrate the continual ongoing revelation of God in the world.

- to recognize that there are many paths to God, but that deep commitment to one path (the Christian path in this case, if that is where you are led) is essential if we are to surrender sufficiently so our life is increasingly not guided by our ego (false self), but by a greater reality.
- to be aware that letting go into Presence is a primary way to experience the reality of the divine in the world moment to moment, and constantly cultivating and participating in the experience of Presence-ness and Being-ness is a continual process of giving and receiving and experiencing God's love which is inherent in Presence-ness and Being-ness (the meaning of the Biblical phrase glorifying God)

In addition Contemplative Christians believe:

- God or Spirit (or you might call it the Relationality that connects and defines all matter [and human beings] from the subatomic to the expanding universe) underlies and sustains all material reality
- through contemplative practices one gradually begins to breakdown the dualistic, judgmental perception of the false self and to experience the unity of matter and spirit and develop a non-dual way of seeing
- Jesus exemplifies both the expression of non-duality and unity of matter and spirit in a human being and taught the path to this realization
- from a place of non-duality and the experience of being part of everything we develop a selfless, self-emptying capacity to love, that deepens the bonds of relationality and coherence between and among all things
- the process of moving to a more enlightened, non-dual way of seeing and being requires both contemplative practices and at certain critical times the Grace of a force outside ourselves to move us through the blocks and attachments of the false self
- the path of realization is itself relational requiring the mutual support and nurturing of community on this journey and the wisdom and transmission of wisdom from guides, teachers, friends, and the Spirit that enlivens everything.

TS: Thank you Father Evagrius for sharing this with me. Having read it carefully it fills me with joy and a certain sense of letting go just to know that this is the path.

FE: Take it with you back across the centuries. Love and blessings to you my son as you walk deeper into this journey to the heart of Love that is within your heart and every heart.