

A Refection

on, An Experiential Experiment in Monastic (Unitive) Practice



Just prior to my reading the ‘Monastic Unitive Practice’ I was visiting the hospice where I had worked for four and half years in Orinda. I had left to complete a doctor of ministry in spiritual classics, realizing I needed to fully focus on that project. The purpose of my visit was to hand off copies on my four volume *Twelve Essays: Spiritual Masters Series* to former colleagues.

Afterwards I met another staff member in the parking lot who wanted to talk. She was telling me about her experience in a Twelve Step program and the need for unity within her life. As most pastors know, the real discussions often happen in the parking lot. I talked to her about kenosis and its relationship to the unitive process. Later when I arrived home and read the ‘Monastic Unitive Practice’ I had one of those Jungian insights, realizing with some pleasure that my journey was now complete, due to that synchronistic moment.

My reflection on the ‘Monastic Unitive Practice’ takes in my own academic reading of the past two years, as well as that parking lot moment. Not only is it consanguine with that scholarly period of time but also the context in which we all share. By context I am referring to the cutting edge of public theology. Certainly Ilia Delio, OSF, PhD who created the Center for Christogenesis comes to mind, particularly her scholarship around Teilhard de Chardin. Notably she has two doctorates, in pharmacology (studying neuromuscular disease) and historical theology. She is the chair of Theology Department at Villanova—the undergraduate home of Pope Leo XIV. Another example is Thomas Jay Ord, the director of the doctoral program in open and

relational theology at Northwind Theological Seminary. The program has its roots in process theology and the work of Alfred North Whitehead and John Cobb. These two examples, one largely Catholic in orientation and the other Protestant, have moved what I may now shorten the idea (and name) to, one of unitive practice.

Of note here is a near current book by Ilia Delio (2023): *The Not-Yet God: Carl Jung, Teilhard de Chardin, and the Relational Whole*. Diarmuid O'Murchu (a resource for the 'Monastic Unitive Practice') contributed the first endorsement on the back page. The name of her first chapter gives you an idea of the content: Consciousness and the Unbroken Whole. In her introduction she notes that we are going through a paradigm shift in knowing God, one that takes place every 500 years or so. Which to me means that the 'Monastic Unitive Practice' is quite timely. Delio states she was inspired by John Haught's book *God after Einstein*, which tells a similar story (a cosmological one) where she is telling a personal story, or one related to a community of people. I have included a link where Haught mentions his book as he introduces an intriguing conversation (that could have taken place but did not) between Einstein and Teilhard.¹ I will end this note on Delio by quoting from her introduction, where she sounds much like Teilhard: "We humans are always ending and beginning; this is the story of our evolution...we are in evolution, and evolution is fundamental to the new story of religion."

Teilhard and process theology seem to be a central *modus operandi* within the 'Monastic Unitive Practice.' I will comment first on the Teilhard link and then move on to process theology via Catherine Keller and Alfred North Whitehead. Thomas Berry noted how "Teilhard described evolution as both a physical and psychic process: matter has its physical without and its psychic within."² While veiled, we can make out the silhouette here of Teilhard's 'Divine Milieu' within the 'Monastic Unitive Practice:

"In the 'Divine Milieu' all the elements of the universe touch each other by that which is most inward and ultimate in them."³

Teilhard's use of the 'Divine Milieu' expressed his understanding of interiority. Berry, influenced by Teilhard, shared the same idea but called it subjectivity. Here we see that connection Delio

¹ The Meaning of Noosphere in Teilhard's Cosmic Vision | John Haught
<https://youtu.be/nG0cgJ6esds?si=Ow0l2JnYsw3ZiRXh>

² Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, Andrew Angyal, Eds., *Thomas Berry: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 204.

³ Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, Andrew Angyal, Eds., *Thomas Berry*, 217.

has with Haught, the cosmological and inner consciousness of humanity, sharing the same elements. Thomas helps us explain this insight of what we might call a cosmic inwardness, as he often described the universe as a communion of subjects.⁴

We do have a lens in which we traditionally ‘see’ a communion of subjects. That lens would be the apophatic and kataphatic. The apophatic or via negativa is often a struggle for Christians in the West, yet:

“...the theology of negation is so necessary to the theology of affirmation that without it God would not be worshipped as the infinite God but as a creature...”⁵ (Nicholas of Cusa)

Let us take a moment then to unveil key elements of this unitive practice (below) not as a list but as a communion of subjects:

To awaken one’s divinity in one’s humanity:

1. Kenosis
2. Incarnation (Embodiment)
3. Theosis (Deification)
4. Contemplation

To awaken one’s humanity in one’s divinity:

1. Radical Empathy
2. Sacramental Vision

The Emergence of the Non-Self (Greater Self)

- Radiant intimacy
- Silent knowing
- Spacious love
- Pure aliveness

Let me suggest that we can view these key elements, not as separate entities, but rather on the space between them. If the key elements were musical notes, we could hear Claude Debussy speak about his “finding music in the space between the notes.” Where Debussy found his music between the notes is remarkably similar to how process theology works, particularly within the

⁴ Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, Andrew Angyal, Eds., *Thomas Berry: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 204.

⁵ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 18.

metaphysical metaphor of en-folding and unfolding. And where we think of process theology as a recent idea, those ideas have a long pedigree:

“All the names are unfoldings of the enfolding one, ineffable name, and as this proper name is infinite, so it enfolds an infinite number of such names of particular perfections. Although there could be many such unfoldings, there are never so many or so great that there could not be more.”⁶ (Nicholas of Cusa)

In process theology, Catherine Keller points out, metaphors are open-ended and help us talk about “what we mean when we talk about God.”⁷ That openness (as in open and relational) is located in Alfred North Whitehead's work. Here I note his shorthand on the ‘Primordial Aspect of God’ and the ‘Consequent Nature of God’ with ‘The Way in which the Primordial Nature is in the World.’ It is an analogous companion to ‘awakens one’s divinity in humanity,’ ‘awaken one’s humanity in one’s divinity’ with the ‘Emergence of the Non-Self’ (Greater Self):

- The Primordial Aspect of God: a non-temporal mind who envisions all the potentialities which the many beings of the universe can actualize.
- The Consequent Nature of God: an everlasting consciousness filled with compassion who emphatically receives the world into the divine life, moment by moment.
- The **(W)**ay in which the Primordial Nature is in the World: (is) a guiding presence in the universe who dwells in the depths of each creature, **luring** it to exercise its creativity in creating the best possible outcome for the situation at hand.⁸ (emphasis mine)

Returning to this idea of the space between the notes, where Debussy found the music, therein is the listening within the silence. One example in ‘To awaken one’s humanity in one’s divinity’ is contemplation:

“Contemplation...is the experiential grasp of reality as subjective, not so much “mine” (which would signify “belonging to the external self”) but “myself” in existential

⁶ Cusa, De docta ignorantia, in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist, 1997), 124-125.

⁷ Note: Keller speaks about a “primal rhythm of call and response, or eros and agape...the divine breathing out unfolding into the world; the divine breathing in, folding us back into the God self.” Which reminds anyone thinking of her use of the word rhythm, that an instrument is being played. Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 125.

⁸ **(W)**ay emphasized here as the Way, meaning people of the Way as process theologians understand Christianity as a ‘way of living.’ **Lure** emphasized as it (and becoming) are often used as key words in process theology and here used to mark ‘the Way.’ For our purposes it is also a deliberate nod to ‘the Way’ as in Daoism. Jay McDaniel, *What is Process Thought* (Anoka: Process Century Press, 2021), 100.

mystery. Contemplation does not arrive at reality after a process of deduction, but by an intuitive awakening in which our free and personal reality becomes fully alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God.”⁹

Thomas Merton ends the last sentence with ‘open(s) out into the mystery of God,’ which is an invitation into that space between the notes. The space between the notes seems to be a discrete location of non-duality.

It is inevitable that ‘steps’ such as those listed in ‘awakens one’s divinity in humanity’ and ‘awakens one’s humanity in one’s divinity,’ are understood as a ladder. Thomas Merton explains that the degrees of humility in Chapter Seven of the ‘Rule’ are like steps on a ladder to heaven. The idea of the ladder however is not one that is simply meritorious of a better spirituality through humility, rather it is a reliance on ascension and descension. In other words, it is a process of kenosis (a word he uses several times) that becomes an ascetic practice. As he makes this process more granular, Merton notes how the descent is a palpable experience of suffering, of salvific suffering and the spirituality of the cross. The ascent is the helping of the healing of others and their spiritual liberation.¹⁰

This is where Berry’s concept of a communion of subjects help us move beyond the ladder (as Merton did) and appreciate these ‘steps’ as points within Teilhard’s ‘Divine Milieux,’ where:

‘All the elements of the universe touch each other by that which is most inward and ultimate in them.’

Berry is also helpful for us here when we consider the space between ‘Sacramental Vision’ and ‘The Emergence of the Non-Self’ (Greater Self). Here he is writing about the connection between cosmogenesis (the divine), the Earth and humanity:

“The voice of the natural world is the resonance of the divine voice. Here the human enters into the divine order, since the divine itself is not directly accessible to human intelligence or understanding. The human in its own structure and functioning is also a

⁹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 8,9.

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *On the Twelve Steps of Humility* · Audiobook, accessed 24 September 2024 <https://youtu.be/OYVG40Bh2T0?si=bn8YcahDnvXWf1r->

manifestation of the divine. But an inner activation of the divine is not possible by humans alone. We need the outer world to activate the inner world of the human.”¹¹

The stillness and connection to the natural world (for Berry) is key to moving on as an invitation for an ‘activation of the divine.’ A spiritual exercise like the unitive practice using these steps, (reminiscent of Berry) recalls Whitehead’s use of the word lure, where:

‘A guiding presence in the universe who dwells in the depths of each creature, luring it to exercise its creativity.’

Summary

My comments in this reflection are in part an attempt to place the ‘Monastic Unitive Practice’ within the contemporary theological landscape. In using these examples I have also in part attempted to find my own way into this unitive practice. While I have not mentioned Default Mode Network and Global Synchrony, I have to think that Whitehead (who taught Math at Harvard) would be pleased.

Delio wrote in her introduction that her book tells a new story of religion. Like Haught, Teilhard and Berry, she is writing about cosmogenesis. Berry wrote his seminal article ‘The New Story’ in 1978. Nearly fifty years has passed since publication and more, considering he was teaching the same material to his students beforehand. The New Story as imprimatur is a portable name and rubric, for cosmogenesis and process theology, reconstituted within contemplative practice.

The necessity and purpose of the ‘Monastic Unitive Practice’ is within that tradition. Ours of course is a contemplative tradition but informed by Merton when he put the words together forging ‘Contemplation and Action.’ It is there within the world, in the parking lots of chance encounters, where we (in Delio’s title for her first chapter) minister to consciousness and the unbroken whole.

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¹¹ Thomas Berry, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Ed., *The Sacred Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 146