



Contemplative Activists

We balance each other well, and we drive each other crazy! My partner is by nature an activist. He is most fully alive when he is serving, building, creating, cleaning! He is externally focussed and seeks for answers outside of himself and from his experiences in the world. I am much more contemplative, reflective and intuitive. Phil prays for opportunities to serve, I ask for direction on how to serve. He looks for breadth of influence, I seek depth of influence. He desires spiritual impact, I desire divine wisdom.

As we rhythm our lives together (which has most often been an awkward activity of stepping on each other's toes, than a beautiful waltz), we deepen and broaden our insight on life for each other. I have learnt to be discontent with only dreaming how the world could be different and now plan how these dreams can be fulfilled. Phil has slowed down his pace, become comfortable listening to his inner self and reflection has produced more effectiveness. He has become more contemplative and I have become more active and this shift has brought greater colour, meaning and effectiveness to our life and ministry.

When it comes to 'doing mission', it is the 'activists' who willingly engage. They are inspired by opportunities to serve and will do whatever it takes to clothe, feed, house, listen, transport, support and care for someone in need. Their spirituality is expressed in their love for humankind. They believe wholeheartedly that Jesus' presence is not just with the poor, but that He is the poor. He is the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the oppressed and the prisoner (Matthew 25:40). They are passionate heroes who mimic the life of Jesus.

Our organisation was once full of them. They weren't paid and trained professionals, they were volunteers. They were Saved to Serve.

Yet at some point we began to express our spirituality more contemplatively. We became more meditative and thoughtful rather than active and vigorous. Our personality changed.

Over time this change in how we express our spirituality has affected our sense of calling and mission. We seem to have denied the reality of the world and surrounded ourselves with a spirituality that protects us and keeps us safe. We have disengaged from brokenness and become obsessed with moral piety, to the neglect of the needs of our neighbour. Our inner and outer worlds have become disconnected. We have invited Jesus into our hearts, but we've not allowed Him to bring His compassion for the world in with Him. Our holiness has become individualised rather than communal. We want the Holy Spirit to transform us and make us whole, but we are not so willing to co-operate with the Holy Spirit to transform our world.

While this shift has generally had a negative effect on our sense of calling and mission, I do believe that when the world becomes part of our contemplation and meditation we are then able to respond creatively to the world's need. When we are courageous enough to face our denial of the world's reality we are then able to offer hope to its brokenness.

I often hear stories from women who have questioned their sexual preference. Some of them were part of a Church at the time of their questioning and they struggled to reconcile what was happening inside them, with what they understood to be the Church's views about homosexuality. Their Church did not know how to pastor them in their confusion, and they were confronted with judgement and condemnation. Consequently their feelings towards the Church in general are negative and often volatile.

In these relationships, being employed by the Church initially made me a target for their resentment. But as I listened to their stories and their pain, I had opportunity to apologise for the way the Church has treated them. Over the last 18 months I have experienced community with these women and tried to be Jesus to them. My integrity and my intentions for being there have been tested, often with direct questions like 'Are you a Christian spy?' and 'Are you trying to save us?'. I am constantly aware that my actions and reactions are being watched. I have been able to restore their relationship with 'a Christian' which is giving me a voice to share that the nature of Jesus is always to love, especially those who have been marginalised by society.

Earlier in the year, a friend who ministers in Surry Hills, wrote a Statement of Apology to the Gay and Lesbian Community for the Church's lack of welcome. He invited Ministers of Religion to sign this statement and he called this little movement 100Revs – aiming to have the support of 100 Reverends. As a public declaration of this statement, he invited these Ministers to march in the Mardi Gra under the 100Revs banner.

The stories and pain of my friends had become part of my contemplation as I have prayed for their healing, their acceptance into the Church community and for a relationship with Jesus to start and grow. Their world had become part of my world. So when the opportunity to march with 100Revs came up, it was a natural step for me to extend the apology I was making in private, to be made public. I was motivated by a sense of justice to 'speak' for those who had been misunderstood and marginalised.

When it was time for our small group to march we weren't sure how we would be received. There was a strong sense of solidarity in the group, but it was obvious that we were 'out of place'. As we marched, there were people in the crowd who were significantly touched by our presence and when I could, I made my way towards them and said 'sorry'. One lady wept and asked where we were, when she was a little girl. A number of people shook each of the group's hand and said a sincere 'thankyou'. I also received a bunch of flowers from a very pink transsexual!

Reflecting on this experience, I ask 'Did we get it right?'. It created controversy for some of the minister's relationship with their denominations, and reduced funding for their ministries. It made a public statement about the inadequacies of the Church and we have no tangible way of measuring its impact on the Gay and Lesbian Community. I'm not sure. But I do know that out of my connection with the world's brokenness and my courage to acknowledge it, I was able to become a bridge and offer hope.

What keeps us from allowing the world to become part of our contemplative spirituality is different for each of us. The resistance to having our mind and heart disturbed is strong. Our world is a messy, chaotic place and our engagement with it often leaves us with broken hearts and confused minds.

A relational approach to mission requires emotional attachment. Service is not defined by a standard pattern of behaviour formed by a program or tradition. Neither is it about adopting a model from someone else's experience. It is birthed from an emotional connection to someone's story of pain and that connection then moves us to compassion. It can be emotionally costly.

It is also inevitable that at some point our theology will prove inadequate. What we have known of God and how He operates in the world, may no longer make sense. Our faith will no longer be a formula for understanding the world, but a mystery that we will have cause to wrestle with as we try to live with unanswered questions.

It takes courage to allow the world to become a part of us and resist the pull towards safety and self-protection. It messes us up. What helps me resist this pull is the stench of a mediocre Christianity whose lack of authenticity deems it powerless in transforming our world. Paul explains this to Timothy as "...having a form of godliness but denying its power." (2Timothy 3:5). This inspires me to take the narrow road and seek after a form of spirituality where my inner journey with God is intimately connected to my outer relationship with the world.

Henri Nouwen in his book, *Reaching Out*, (1957 p50) shares a story:

"Not too long ago a priest told me that he cancelled his subscription to the New York Times because he felt that the endless stories about war, crime, power games and political manipulation only disturbed his mind and heart and prevented him from meditation and prayer.

That is a sad story because it suggests that only by denying the world can you live in it, that only by surrounding yourself by artificial, self-induced quietude can you live a spiritual life. A real spiritual life does exactly the opposite: it makes us so alert and aware of the world around us, that all that is and happens becomes part of our contemplation and meditation and invites us to a free and fearless response."

Like this priest, we have come to define personal righteousness and holiness as just that – personal. It belongs predominantly to our inner world and we have not learnt to share it or extend it to our outer world. The problem is that while God connects with us as individuals, His intention is always that His life in us is to be lived out in community. Our forgiveness and cleansing comes from our vertical relationship with Him (1 John 1:9), but our healing comes from our horizontal relationships in community (James 5:16). It is this healing that our broken world is hungry for. It needs us to be maintaining and demonstrating healthy, equitable and life-giving relationships in our home, our neighbourhood, our local community and on the world stage.

Campbell Roberts and Danielle Strickland, (*just:imagine*,2008,p32) express this approach in defining biblical righteousness and justice:

"In modern usage righteousness often carries the understanding of personal morality or religious piety but justice relates to public judicial fairness and equal rights. In biblical text, however, righteousness often includes what we mean by justice and is used as a word with identical meaning. Righteousness in the Bible conveys the idea of doing justice and it may lead us to some new understandings if we use versions of scripture that recognise this more frequently."

In the Left wing, feminist, lesbian space (a very narrow definition, but it gives you some perspective), where I volunteer my time each week, my friends are Union Representatives, Child Protection workers, Counsellors of women who are victims of violence and sexual abuse, advocates for Aboriginal rights, Women's rights and Gay rights, Anti-war protestors, Environmentalists and Political activists. They carry a strong sense of justice within them and have a hunger for equality. They are hospitable to strangers who are homeless, teenagers who have been kicked out of home, and friends who are abandoned by partners. When I consider their lives, I see the heart of God reflected in them. Deep within their soul, they know God. How could they not?

My role in that community, as a follower of Jesus, is to applaud their sense of justice and affirm where I see God's heart reflected in their life. They are searching for a spirituality that goes beyond mere words and religious rhetoric. As I partner with the Holy Spirit, I try to root their activism in the character of God who shares their passion and who is concerned about injustice. He wants to connect their outer world convictions to an inner journey with Him.

This experience has challenged my comparably monastic lifestyle. These women have a heightened awareness of injustice and a passionate desire to advocate for the oppressed. I have had to confess my omission in hearing and following God's call to just living and learn from their skilfulness and resolution.

The call to be part of Jesus' mission is not a mystical one. I don't believe it even starts with prayer. It is simple obedience. The call is found in Jesus' question to us, "this is where I'm going, will you come with me?". The world is so desperately in need of the hope that we experience daily in our walk with Jesus, yet we have often denied this reality for the sake of maintaining a private, introspective spirituality. Choosing to face this reality and actively engage with the world takes courage. It will disturb our plans, our families and our Corps programs. But it is only then that we are able to respond creatively to the world's brokenness and offer hope. The Kingdom of God needs more Contemplative Activists.