



Into the Silent Land

A Lenten Resource based on the book by Martin Laird, O.S.A.

Prepared by The Rev'd Brenda Rockell for St John's Anglican Church Royal Oak.

Welcome to week **three** of our Lenten journey of contemplation for 2021

This week, we are looking at the second chapter of the book, called 'The wild hawk of the mind.' You are invited to read the excerpts, ponder and perhaps journal with the reflection questions, and try the practice.

Our plans to gather and discuss our experience of this material have been disrupted by Covid. Watch this space for info about when we can try again for the brunch.

When we are free to be in our building, the St John's Centering Prayer group meets for a short contemplative service at 8.30am on the 2nd and 4th Sundays of the month. We hope that this will be able to happen next on 14 March. All are welcome to participate.

Covid willing, we will go ahead with our retreat day to gather up the Lenten journey on Saturday March 27 at the church. More info to follow.

Did this period of time at Level 3 make it easier or harder for you to find space for meditation? Whichever it was, remember each day is a new opportunity to begin again, just as every moment within the prayer is a new opportunity to return to silence.

Excerpts from *Into the Silent Land*, Chapter 2: 'The Wild Hawk of the Mind'

When pummelled by too many thoughts a long walk would cure me of the punch-drunk feeling of lifelessness. The normal route led along open fields, and not infrequently I would see a man walking his four Kerry blue terriers. These were amazing dogs. Bounding energy elastic grace, and electric speed, they coursed and leapt through open fields. It was invigorating just to watch these muscular stretches of freedom race along. Three of the four dogs did this, I should say. The fourth stayed behind and, off to the side of its owner, ran in tight circles. I could never understand why it did this; it had all the room in the world to leap and bound. One day I was bold enough to ask the owner, "Why does your dog do that? Why does it run in little circles instead of running with the others?"

He explained that before he acquired the dog, it had lived practically all its life in a cage and could only exercise by running in circles. For this dog, to run meant to run in tight circles. So instead of bounding through the open fields that surrounded it, it ran in circles.

This event has always stayed with me as a powerful metaphor of the human condition. For indeed we are free, as the Psalmist insists, "My heart like a bird has escaped from the snare of the fowler" (Ps 123:7). But the memory of the cage remains. And so we run in tight little circles, even while immersed in open fields of grace and freedom.

The mind's obsessive running in tight circles generates and sustains the anguish that forms the mental cage in which we live much of our lives—or what we take to be our lives. This cage can be comfortable enough; that dog wagged its tail all day long. But the long-term effects on humans can still be pretty damaging. It makes us believe we are separate from God. God then becomes an object somewhere over there in the distance and as much in need of appeasement as praise. This tyrant-god is generated by the illusion of separateness and requires us to live in a mental prison (however lavishly furnished). It makes us believe that we are alone, shameful, stupid, afraid, unloveable. We believe this lie and our life becomes a cocktail party of posturing masquerade in order to hide the anxiety and ignorance of who we truly are.

THE INTERIOR VIDEO

The woman could blow like silk across the stage or drive like a storm through the corps de ballet. To watch this world-class ballerina was to behold light and grace in human form. But if you would ask her about her own experience as source of beauty and inspiration you would see only a vacant stare of shocked disbelief. She would speak instead of an obsessive and torturously perfectionist mind that left her grinding her teeth. She described her inner state as a series of internal videos that constantly played and that she constantly watched. Her attention was routinely stolen by them.

What were these videos that played in her head? Usually something about how she wasn't quite up to standard—not just regarding ballet but *any* aspect of her life. This accompanied another series of videos concerning her intense anger. The anger registered in her body as a clenched jaw and a physique completely free of any suggestion of fat. Deeper than the anger, though, was the fear: fear of what the critics might say of her dancing, fear that her husband might wake up one day and decide to leave her, fear of being alone.

There were a lot of videos about pain. The most debilitating concerned some very old pain from childhood. One day her mother walked into her bedroom as she sat looking at herself in the mirror. The mother said to her, "I hope you don't think you're beautiful." She was indeed beautiful. In every season of life—as a young girl, an adolescent, a young adult, a mature woman—she was beautiful. But this beauty became a gag knotted behind her: for she believed she was ugly. When as a teenager she won a highly prized scholarship to study ballet, her mother said, "Why would they give you that? Everybody knows you've got two left feet." And so, although she has danced to great acclaim all over the world, she believes she's a klutz with two left feet. All of this plays in her head. Even if she isn't watching the video and pressing rewind to watch it again, and then again, and yet again, the video still plays in the background, like that dirge music in malls and lifts. This video was the cage that kept her running in tight circles.

She did find solace. She took long walks out on the Yorkshire moors. If she walked long enough, her roiling mind would begin to settle. The expanse of heather was scented balm that soothed the throbbing anger, fear, and pain. She described how on one occasion her anxiety began to drop like layers of scarves. Suddenly she was aware of being immersed in a sacred presence that upheld her and everything.

While this experience out on the moors happened only once, it proved a real turning point in her life and drew her into the way of prayer. She knew from her own experience that there was something in her that was deeper than her pain and anxiety and that when the chaos of the mind was quieted, the sense of anguish gave way to a sense of divine presence. R. S. Thomas recounts this sentiment movingly in his poem, "The Moor."

It was like church to me.
I entered it on soft foot,
Breath held like a cap in the hand.
It was quiet.
What God was there made himself felt,
Not listened to, in clean colours
That brought a moistening of the eye,
In movement of the wind over grass.

There were no prayers said. But stillness
Of the heart's passions—that was praise
Enough; and the mind's cession
Of its kingdom. I walked on,
Simple and poor, while the air crumbled
And broke on me generously as bread.

What both the ballet dancer and R. S. Thomas seem to realize is that our own awareness, our own interiority, runs deeper than we realize. If we turn within and see only noise, chaos, thinking, anxiety—what R. S. Thomas calls "the mind's kingdom," then we have not seen deeply enough into the vast and expansive moors of human awareness. When the wandering, roving mind grows still, when fragmented craving grows still, when the "heart's passions" are rapt in stillness, then is "the mind's cession of its kingdom," a great letting go as a deeper dimension of the human person is revealed. From this depth God is seen to be the ground of both peace and chaos, one with ourselves and one with all the world, the ground "in whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). This depth of silence is more than the mere absence of sound and is the key. As R. S. Thomas puts it, "the silence holds with its gloved hand the wild hawk of the mind."

...This thinking mind that "whirls about" is constantly concerned with thoughts, concepts, and images, and we obviously need this dimension of mind to meet the demands of the day, to think, to reflect on and enjoy life. But the thinking mind has a professional hazard. If it is not engaged in its primary task of reason, given half a chance it fizzes and boils with obsessive thoughts and feelings. There are, however, deeper demands, deeper encounters of life, love, and God, and there is far more to being alive than riding breathlessly around in the emotional roller coaster of obsessive thinking.

This requires, however, the awakening and cultivation of the "heart-mind." ... In fact, precisely because we think our lives, think our spirituality think about God, we end up perceiving God as some "thing" over there, some cause among many other causes of things. Thoughts about God make God appear, as Theophan says, "outside you." Theophan is but one of a host of saints and sages who attest that thinking about God is a problem if you want to commune with God. In fact, because our attention is so completely riveted to what's playing on the big screen of our thinking mind, we can live completely unaware of the deeper ground of the heart that already communes with God, that knows only communion, as branches know deeply the vine (Jn 15:5).

Therefore, when Theophan speaks of descending from "your head into your heart" he does not mean what modern pop psychology means when it says we must get out of our heads and feel our feelings. He means shift your attention from the screen of thinking mind on which both thoughts and feelings incessantly appear, as they are meant to, to the ground of the heart, this immense valley of awareness itself in which thoughts and feelings appear, Theophan says, "Images, however sacred they may be, retain the attention outside, whereas at the time of prayer the attention must be within—in the heart. The concentration of attention in the heart—this is the starting point of prayer." This shifting of the attention from the objects of awareness to the silent vastness of the heart that is awareness itself will bring the thinking mind to silence, and the silence "holds with its gloved hands the wild hawk of the mind."

Questions for reflection

+ How do you resonate with the metaphors of the dog that runs in circles, and the 'interior video'? What did you feel, as you were reading those two stories?

+ Can you identify any of your own 'interior videos'?

+ Can you visualise, or feel in your body, what it might be like to descend from your mind into your heart? Have you tasted this experience in any of your times sitting in silence? Try to describe it.

+ How does it sit with you, the idea that it's not possible to commune with God by thinking about God?

+ Our Christian tradition has testified through the ages that God is not 'an object outside us,' but is instead the source of our awareness and being. And yet, many of our prayers assume a God 'out there.' What has been your experience of wrestling with this tension?

You may wish to keep a notebook and journal your responses to these questions and your 'field notes' from your practice of silence as the weeks of Lent pass.

Invitation to practice

For this third week, the invitation to new practitioners is still to sit – in a chair, on a prayer-stool, on the ground if you're flexible – and just 'be', uninterrupted, in silence, for 10 minutes each day with your eyes closed. If you can increase the time to 20 minutes, do so.

This week, continue using the 'sacred word' or phrase that you settled on last week to help you let go of thoughts. If a different word or phrase presents itself to you, use that instead, but try to stick with it for more than a week if you can, and don't change it up within a single session of meditation. It's important not to get too focused on the sacred word, but just to use it to give the 'wild hawk of the mind' something to do, while your awareness is elsewhere.

If it helps, you might like to begin your meditation by using a gesture or some kind of inward movement that helps you 'descend from your mind to your heart.' As you notice your attention rising back up into your thinking mind during the prayer, simply drop it back down into a wider, more spacious and less agitated place within you.

This week also, you may want to try noticing, very briefly, the content of the thoughts, images and feelings as you let go of them. What video is playing today? Don't dwell on, judge or analyse them. If you can't remember them at the end of your session that's great. But if you find yourself hooking onto thoughts, you can try naming the video, and then use your sacred word to return you to the quiet, imageless screen that the video is playing on. This can have the effect of diminishing the control the thoughts have over our minds.

If you want help with time-keeping, or find it easier to be silent if your eyes are focused on an image, you can [click on this link](#) to play a 10 minute video of silence, bracketed at beginning and end by a bell, and with an icon and candle to meditate with.