

THE MONASTIC PERSONALITY

by Dr. Beverly Lanzetta

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Session 7: Mystical Solidarity and Divine Rhythm

NOW BECAUSE OF EVERYTHING else I've said, the monastic person is very sensitive to suffering. They have a heightened sense of intimacy with life, and therefore they feel the deep wounding of life: the destruction of the environment; violence inflicted upon animals, nature, and humans; the crassness of material culture; war; all the things that make you feel like you don't belong in this world. That make you wonder what's wrong with the world, and when are we going to get over this. But the monastic personality is sensitive to and bears suffering because of this pliable, fluid self I was talking about earlier. There is a mystical solidarity with others' suffering that can often be confused with one's own pain or with Divine suffering.

One of the things I've noticed with people in spiritual direction is that every suffering we feel is not our own suffering. We can feel the suffering of the world. We can feel the suffering of trees being cut down. We can feel the suffering of war. And we have to begin to learn to distinguish between these feelings, because if the soul is very open, you can be buried by this kind of overflowing sense of solidarity.

Understanding the distinction is essential for the maturing of the inner life, because your inner life is already unbounded and has an intrinsic healing nature. Therefore, it can take on or assume the healing of others. Furthermore, many people are attracted to this kind of personality. Many people who need healing or don't have good boundaries are attracted to this kind of person, so it makes it even harder for you to overcome that.

This can lead to an unconscious tension of bearing other people's pain in a way that is not helpful to your inner life. Mystical solidarity with the world is a soul level of consciousness. It is something that happens with you and the Divine. It is not something that you can totally assume in your physical body.

Therefore, in an odd kind of way, in all senses, the monastic personality is comfortable dying. What I mean by this is that they have an intrinsic capacity to pass back and forth between inner and outer levels of reality. I'm not talking about physical death, but about dying to the self, dying to let go. The mystical personality knows what it's like to live in multiple realms at once, to pass back and forth between realities.

If this natural ability to be fluid and to move back and forth, to die and let go of the past is stifled, suppressed, rejected, or otherwise hidden, it can be detrimental to the spiritual, mental, and physical health of the person. You have to be able to feel that you can reach the highest spiritual state in yourself without someone else putting a limit on it, and you have to feel in yourself that you are able to practice the letting go of all these realities, because it is in the natural flow of the spiritual life to do that.

When this natural flow of letting go and coming into presence - letting go and coming into presence, being able to seamlessly move into prayer and then come back into the world, moving into meditation and then coming back into the world - matures and gets easier, you will be able to be more grounded. At the same time, if someone tries to stop or oppress the flow, it can feel like a real type of dying that is destructive to the person. You can't sustain that.

If this is something that was very present in your childhood, for instance if your parents were alcoholic and were fighting all the time, you could never find a place of safety where it was easy to be in our natural rhythm of flowing in and out of the Divine. You might have experienced that it was hard to be at the level of the deepest self, to relate to the world. These suppressions translate into patterns in the brain and the bio-spiritual body that are antithetical to your true rhythm. It's as if you're a river that is flowing one way and someone puts in a dam and your natural flow is constantly blocked, and the diversion becomes imprinted in the brain. Meditation and prayer, because they are deeper and more focused, have a capacity to change those patterns. Intense spiritual work, mystically looking at your own truth as we're trying to do here together, has the capacity to change and reverse those patterns. We all have a natural inner rhythm that moves with the divine flow. For instance, maybe you're a morning person and you feel that you can connect with Spirit then in an intense way. Or others may be night people. They really don't get up to speed until the nighttime comes. And all the levels in between these. What is your natural rhythm?

Merton says that a monk is useless to the world because she or he wants to live in God's time, in God's rhythm. They are rebelling against all the other rhythms that are imposed on your inner rhythm, on your true natural rhythm, that have affected patterns in your brain and your personality. Each person has to find her or his own natural rhythm.

Part of what happens in monasteries that practice the liturgy of the hours, or in a Zen monastery with meditation, is that the monks enter into a kind of formal strict structure which helps re-focus their rhythm. But in a way this may become detrimental as well because it is a superimposed rhythm. For example, the monastery rhythm set a pattern in Merton's being, and in his brain, so that he could live in God's time. If you were to stay in a monastery and participate in the monastic *horarium*, you'd see that people are moving their lives according to this rhythm. This helps to establish that there is

another time frame, another space frame besides the consensual, worldly one. But at the same time, as Merton matured in the spiritual life, he needed to find his own divine rhythm. He asked to retreat to a hermitage. This was a very important step—to give himself permission, in the positive sense, to die as the Divine dies, to flow in and out with the daily rhythm of the day.

Living and being in the world, being born, is contradictory and paradoxical. We will always have elements and flawed parts of our personality. And we will always be seeking truth at the center. But this is part of the holy journey. To aspire, to touch upon the original condition of one's life in the Divine.

More than anything the monastic personality needs an experience of mercy and compassion toward the self. Because of the sensitivity of the person, this type of personality tends to be very hard on itself. It tends to see its flaws with a gigantic magnifying glass. It has a tendency to see other people's flaws as being not as important as one's own flaws. So very important on this path is to let the divine benevolence, the divine mercy heal oneself. Take off the magnifying glass; and have mercy and compassion for your own flaws and foibles. This is radically significant for moving into a monastic consciousness because the cynicism or doubt or despair with which you look at your own personality or your own ability to survive in the world permeates all your relationships on some overt or subtle level. This might be a sense of victimization or whatever your version of this might be. It prohibits you from being easy, from resting. In God's time, in the Divine time, you will be transformed. The more you surrender to that, the more you pray, the more you practice, the more you meditate, the more you will move deeper into mystical life. And you will be shown from within your own being the steps you need to take.

I'll end this talk now on the monastic personality. Amen.



REFLECTION

How have you felt the deep wounding of life? Is it sometimes difficult for you to distinguish between your own suffering and that of another person/the world? Can you sense a difference between compassion, and a total absorption in another's suffering? Have you felt as though you are living in multiple realms at once? Has your natural holy rhythm been disrupted in your life? If so, how? What would it look like for you to live in "God's time," as Merton said? Can you rest and be easy in God's rhythm?



PRACTICE

We will return to the practice in Session 2. We will now add an additional step to help us image a way of being in true compassion with another without losing our own identity, but being able to move back into our silent, inner self.

Sit in a chair with your feet on the floor and take some deep breaths from your abdomen, just letting the energy flow in and out, making a sound as you exhale. Imagine that you are a young child and see if you can find the place that you used to go to, to be alone. Maybe it was in nature, maybe it was playing in your room, maybe it was by a river. When you find that place, put a great white light around the child that you see yourself to be. Observe your child self, and fill it with love, holding that light closely, so that you create around your child a living enclosure of light. Then take the light of enclosure and bring it into your adult heart. Feel it come into your heart—the child and the enclosure of love-filled light. Allow it into your heart. And rest in there.

Now imagine a person is there with you and that you can reach out and take their hand, staying in your own place, but feeling connected to that person. Stay in your heart, your enclosure. Feel what it feels like to be safe in your center and connected. Breathe with slow, gentle breaths. Maintain your solitude in your enclosure, but feel the love and compassion going back and forth with the imagined person next to you. In your mind say to the person you are imagining, "I love you and I am a monk. I can love and yet maintain my personal, sacred space where only my heart is surrounded with the love-filled light." Maintain your gentle but deep breathing. Now, say to the person in your mind, "I am going into my cell, into my space of love and light," and put your hand over your heart and un-connect from the person next to you. Stay in your center.



PRAYER

O Radiant Silence!
Into your darkening
shadow and starry sky
I commit my soul

Take me to Your Temple
Where spirits rest and
heaven is still
There, to enter your secret
enclosure
The measure of my
monk's heart.

—Beverly Lanzetta



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