

Living in the Secret Place

There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating-meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship.

The secular world of today values and cultivates only the first level, assured that *there* is where the real business of mankind is done, and scorns, or smiles in tolerant amusement at, the cultivation of the second level-a luxury enterprise, a vestige of superstition, an occupation for special temperaments. But in a deeply religious culture men know that the deep level of prayer and of divine attendance is the most important thing in the world. It is at this deep level that the real business of life is determined.

The secular mind is an abbreviated, fragmentary mind, building upon only a part of man's nature and neglecting a part-the most glorious part. The religious mind involves the whole of man, embraces his relations with time within their true ground and setting in the eternal Lover. It ever keeps close to the fountains of divine creativity. In lowliness it knows joys and stabilities, peace and assurances, that are utterly incomprehensible to the secular mind.

Between the two levels is fruitful interplay, but ever the accent must be upon the deeper level, where the soul dwells in the presence of the Holy One. For the religious man is forever bringing all affairs of the first level down into the light, holding them there in the presence, reseeing them and the whole of the world of men and things in a new and overturning way, and responding to them in spontaneous, incisive, and simple ways of love and faith.

Facts remain facts, when brought into the presence in the deeper level, but their value, their significance, is wholly realigned. Much apparent wheat becomes utter chaff, and some chaff becomes wheat. For faith and hope and love are engendered in the soul as we practice submission to the light within-and humbly begin to see all things through the eyes of God.

The upper level of our minds plays upon the deeper level of divine immediacy of internal communion and prayer. It furnishes us with the objects of divine concern. It supplies the present-day tools of reflection whereby the experience of eternity is knit into the fabric of time and thought.

Theologies and symbols and creeds, though inevitable, are transient and become obsolescent, while the life of God sweeps on through the souls of men in continued revelation and creative newness. To that divine life we must cling. For the heart of the religious life is in commitment and worship, not in reflection and theory.

How, then, shall we lay hold of that Life and live a life of prayer without ceasing? By the quiet, persistent practice of turning all our being, day and night, in prayer and inward worship and surrender toward Him who calls in the deeps of our souls.

Mental habits of inward orientation must be established. An inner, secret turning to God can be made fairly steady, after weeks and months and years of practice, and lapses and failures and returns. It is as simple an art as Brother Lawrence described in *Practicing the Presence*, but it may be long before we achieve any steadiness in the process.

Begin now, as you read these words, to offer your whole selves, utterly and in joyful abandon, to Him who is within. With secret ejaculations of praise, turn in humble wonder to the light, faint though it may be.

Keep contact with the outer world of sense and meanings. This is no discipline in absent-mindedness. Walk and talk and work and laugh with your friends.

But behind the scenes, keep up the life of simple prayer and inward worship. Keep it up throughout the day. Let inward prayer be your last act before you fall asleep and your first act when you awake. And in time you will find, as did Brother Lawrence, that "those who have the gale of the Holy Spirit go forward even in sleep."

The first days and weeks and months are awkward and painful, but enormously rewarding. Awkward, because it takes constant vigilance and effort and reassertions of the will, at the first level. Painful, because our lapses are so frequent, the intervals when we forget Him so long. Rewarding, because we have begun to live.

But these weeks and months and perhaps even years must be passed through before He gives us greater and easier stayedness upon Himself. Lapses and forgettings are so frequent.

Our surroundings grow exciting. Our occupations are exacting. But when you catch yourself again, lose no time in self-recriminations, but breathe a silent prayer for forgiveness and begin again, just where you are.

Offer even your broken worship up to Him and say, "This is what I am except Thou aid me." Admit no discouragement, but ever return quietly to Him, and wait in His presence.

At first the practice of inward prayer is a process of alternation of attention between outer things and the inner light. Preoccupation with either brings the loss of the other. Yet what is sought is not *alternation*, but *simultaneity*: worship undergirding every moment, the continuous current and background of all moments of life.

Long practice indeed is needed before alternation yields to concurrent immersion in both levels at once. The "plateaus in the learning curve" are so long, and many falter and give up, assenting to alternation as the best they can do. And no doubt in His graciousness God gives us His gifts, even in intermittent communion, and touches us into flame, far beyond our achievements.

But the hunger of the committed one is for unbroken communion and adoration, and we may be sure God longs for us to find it and supplements our weakness. For our quest is of His initiation and is carried forward in His tender power and completed by His grace.

The first signs of simultaneity are given when at the moment of recovery from a period of forgetting there is a certain sense that we have not *completely* forgotten Him. It is as though we are only coming back into a state of vividness which had endured in dim and tenuous form. What takes place now is not reinstatement of a broken prayer but return to liveliness of that which had endured, but mildly. The currents of His love have been flowing, but whereas we had been drifting in Him, now we swim.

But periods of dawning simultaneity and steadfast prayer may come and go, lapsing into alternation for long periods and returning in glorious power. And we learn to submit to the inner discipline of withdrawing of His gifts. For if the least taint of spiritual pride in our prayer-growth has come, it is well that He humble us until we are worthy of greater trust.

For though we begin the practice of secret prayer with a strong sense that we are the initiators and that by our wills we are establishing our habits, maturing experience brings awareness of being met and tutored, purged and disciplined, simplified and made pliant in His holy will by a power waiting within us. For God Himself works in our souls, in their deepest depths, taking increasing control as we are

progressively willing to be prepared for His wonder. And we have our firsthand assurance that He who began that good work in us, as in Timothy, can establish us in Him, can transform intermittency and alternation into simultaneity and continuity.

There is no new technique for entrance upon this stage where the soul in its deeper levels is continuously at home in Him. The processes of inward prayer do not grow more complex, but more simple.

In the early weeks we begin with simple, whispered words. Formulate them spontaneously, "Thine only. Thine only." Or seize upon a fragment of the Psalms: "So panteth my soul after Thee, O God."

Repeat them inwardly, over and over again. For the conscious cooperation of the surface level is needed at first, before prayer sinks into the second level as habitual divine orientation. Change the phrases, as you feel led, from hour to hour or from forenoon to afternoon.

If you wander, return and begin again. But the time will come when verbalization is not so imperative and yields place to the attitudes of soul that you meant the words to express—attitudes of humble bowing before Him, attitudes of lifting high your whole being before Him that the light may shine into the last crevice and drive away all darkness, attitudes of approach and nestling in the covert of His wings, attitudes of amazement and marvel at His transcendent glory, attitudes of self-abandonment, attitudes of feeding in an inward holy supper upon the Bread of Life. If you find, after a time, that these attitudes become diffused and vague, no longer firm-textured, then return to verbalizations and thus restore their solidity.

But longer discipline in this inward prayer will establish more enduring upreachings of praise and submission and relaxed

listening in the depths-an unworded but habitual orientation of all one's self about Him who is the focus. The process is much simpler now. Little glances, quiet breathings of submission and invitation suffice.

We pray, and yet it is not we who pray, but a Greater who prays in us. Something of our punctiform selfhood is weakened, but never lost. All we can say is, prayer is taking place, and we are given to participate.

In holy hush we bow in eternity and know the Divine Concern tenderly enwrapping us and all things within His persuading love. Here all human initiative has passed into acquiescence, and He works and prays and seeks His own through us, in exquisite, energizing life. Here the autonomy of the inner life becomes complete and we are joyfully *prayed through*, by a seeking life that flows through us into the world of men.

Thomas Kelly (1893-1941) was a Quaker scholar, educator, minister, lecturer, and writer. Adapted from A Testament of Devotion by Thomas R. Kelly, copyright 1941 by Harper & Brothers. Published by HarperSanFrancisco. Used by permission.