



Full product can be ordered by calling
1-800-333-8300 or by visiting
www.FaithAliveResources.org

show me 

sample

Faith Alive Christian Resources

Property of Faith Alive Christian Resources. All rights reserved.

DON POSTEMA

Space for God

*Study and Practice
of Spirituality and Prayer*



Space
for God

Space for God

*Study and Practice
of Spirituality and Prayer*

DON POSTEMA



Grand Rapids, Michigan

Cover art: Three Willows at Sunset, Vincent Van Gogh
Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, Netherlands/
Bridgeman Art Library, London/Superstock

Back cover photo: © Paula Christensen, Ann Arbor, Michigan

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Postema, Donald H., 1934-
Space for God.

Bibliography: p.

1. Spiritual life. 2. Prayer. 3. Devotional literature.
4. Postema, Donald H., 1934- I. Title. II. Series.
BV4501.2.P5565 1983 248.3 83-15504
ISBN 978-0-933140-46-2

Space for God, © 1983, 1997 (Second Edition) by Faith Alive Christian Resources,
2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America. 1-800-333-8300

A Leader's Guide for this book is also available.

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5

CONTENTS

PREFACE by Henri J. M. Nouwen	7
AN INVITATION	9
THE JOURNEY CONTINUES.....	10
... AND CONTINUES	12
CHAPTER	
1 MAKING SPACE.....	13
2 I BELONG	33
3 GRATITUDE TAKES NOTHING FOR GRANTED	51
4 GESTURES OF GRATITUDE.....	69
5 PRAYER AS ATTITUDE: THE GRATEFUL HEART	89
6 PRAYER AS ACT.....	109
7 WRESTLING WITH GOD	133
8 PRAYER AND JUSTICE/COMPASSION	153
9 THE GOAL IS GLORY	177
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	200
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	204
ART CREDITS.....	207

PREFACE

In this book Don Postema offers us a space to live gratefully in the presence of God. He gives us his personal spiritual journey, his experience in the Christian ministry, his wide interest in art and literature, and most of all his own hospitable personality as the space in which we, who read this book, can listen fearlessly to God's voice. The way Don has organized this book shows its hospitality: each chapter contains his own reflections, a wide variety of quotations that function as windows to insight, exercises to help us practice what we have learned, and encouragement to fill the empty pages of a personal journal with notes on our own journey. Thus the book does what it describes: it creates space for God.

I cannot think of a better way to introduce this book than to follow Don's own method. First I want to offer a few reflections on the unique quality of this book, then I plan to take a look through the windows to insight, and finally I would like to write some notes on the empty pages. I won't offer any exercises!

I. This book is inviting because it is personal. Don has not hesitated to offer his own exuberant personality as a guide into the territory of the spiritual life. Against the background of his own unique life, he witnesses to the vital presence of God within and among us. The result is a refreshing presentation of a Calvinistic spirituality. During the sabbatical year

that Don spent at Yale Divinity School he discovered intimate connections between the writings of his own spiritual father, John Calvin, and the words of many great spiritual fathers of other Christian traditions. This discovery made it possible for Don to develop a spirituality deeply rooted in his own religious heritage while open to many influences that at first seemed foreign. What has emerged from this process of connecting and reconnecting is a spirituality of gratitude.

I find it very striking that this book has become an expression of and a call to gratitude. Don is a profoundly grateful person. Gratitude is one of his most visible characteristics. This not only has made my friendship with him a joyful experience but also has made me come to a deeper appreciation of John Calvin's theology of sanctification, the theology that forms the basis of Don's spirituality.

II. The windows to insight that Don opens for us are as attractive as they are unusual. Drawings by Rembrandt, Vincent Van Gogh, Yushi Nomura; quotations from Scripture, theologians, monks, and poets; and songs from a variety of origins—they all show us new ways of living gratefully in the house of God. Personally I am deeply moved by the evocative way in which Vincent Van Gogh has become present in this book on the spiritual life. Few people would ever think of "the man who cut off his ear" as a guide to God. But

those who work with this book will come to know that this Dutch artist not only once was a minister who preached God's Word to the poor but also remained a minister through his letters, drawings, and paintings. I am grateful to Don Postema for placing this controversial Dutchman in the same book with John Calvin.

III. Finally a few notes on the empty pages. God gathers, reconciles, unites. God wants all people who search for him to be one in him through his Son Jesus Christ. Reading Don's book, I came to realize that it is an invitation to unity through prayer, especially through the prayer of gratitude. What else can make us one but prayer? What else can unite us but a common recognition that all that is, is a divine gift calling forth from us words and actions of thanks? What else can gather us but a spirituality of gratitude that sets us free from our many divisions and allows us to celebrate together the presence of the living Christ among us? Don has brought

together John Calvin and Thomas Merton; Dutch and Japanese drawings; Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox reflections. What unites them? Gratitude, the deep awareness of the giftedness of life. The prayer of thanks is indeed the place where we all can meet—not looking at each other and finding fault with each other but looking together at him who forgives us our faults over and again.

When Don came to Yale Divinity School for a year of study, he was searching for an authentic spirituality within his own tradition. Now, a few years later, we have a book that was born there. In this book Don gives more than he received. That is the mystery of gratitude. What is accepted with thanksgiving multiplies in the sharing of it with others. Five loaves and two fishes, received as a gift, were enough to feed a multitude of people. *Space for God* is a hopeful sign of this mystery of gratitude.

—Henri J. M. Nouwen

AN INVITATION

I like this story of St. Sarapion the Sindonite, a Desert Father of fourth-century Egypt. He

travelled once on pilgrimage to Rome. Here he was told of a celebrated recluse, a woman who lived always in one small room, never going out. Sceptical about her way of life—for he was himself a great wanderer—Sarapion called on her and asked: “Why are you sitting here?” To this she replied: “I am not sitting. I am on a journey.”

—Told by Fr. Kallistos Ware in *The Orthodox Way*, p. 7

We are all on a journey, a spiritual pilgrimage. Whether we are wanderers or sitters, we are on the Way (Acts 19:23). You are. I am. And now our journeys meet for a short time in this book. I have written it with the hope that it will provide a little guidance and encouragement to explorers of spirituality and prayer—the “heart in pilgrimage” (George Herbert).

I recognize how busy people are. I myself am much more a “wanderer” than a “sitter,” more gregarious than introspective, more busy than patient and laid-back, more “extrovert” than “introvert.” I wondered whether such a person could be quiet, contemplative, prayerful and could carry that prayerful attitude into the busyness and noisiness of life.

Then I got to know Henri Nouwen.

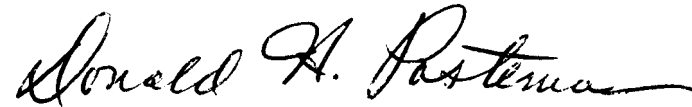
I was granted a sabbatical by Campus Chapel to pursue study in what I called “Toward a Reformed Understanding of Spirituality.” I am very grateful to the church for that year of study and exploration, for it was an experience that deeply affected my life. My sabbatical journey took me to conferences, retreats, monasteries, books, and conversations with wanderers and sitters. More importantly, I was able to study at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut. There I renewed my friendship with Father Henri J. M. Nouwen, a fellow Dutchman. Henri was like a hurricane of activity. And it was from him I learned that even hassled and harried people can have a deep spiritual center, a continuing life of prayer and contemplation, and a creative relationship with God. I had read many of his books, but now took courses, listened to lectures, and spent time in stimulating conversation. His inspiration has been invaluable. So many of his words and thoughts have become my own, that I’m sure they have crept into what I have written without proper recognition and will be spotted by those who know him. I can only express my deepest appreciation. His continued interest in this book emphasizes what a generous and lasting friend he is. Before I left New Haven, he and his assistant at Yale, John Mogabgab, inspired me and gave me helpful suggestions as I developed a “spirituality of gratitude.”

Colleagues, friends, and members of Campus Chapel also encouraged me to articulate and share what I had learned. How grateful I am to them for urging me to continue exploring a Reformed spirituality in much more depth. Campus Chapel generously gave me the freedom and support to teach and write, to give numerous retreats, seminars, lectures, and sermons. I also deeply appreciate the patient help of the staff, editors, and artist that at last brought *Space for God* to publication.

Finally I thank my family for accompanying me on my journey. How grateful I am that Elaine, my wife, has been willing to share and to risk this pilgrimage—and the writing about it. What a patient fellow traveler in life and in prayer she has been! During the writing of this book, the earthly journey of my father, another Henry, ended. He knows now

the joy of perpetually being in the presence of God and is constantly aware of the splendor of our gracious Parent, a splendor we only glimpse. He and my mother, Anna (without whom I never would have begun the journey!), have been a support in my artistic and theological pursuits.

To these last three loving persons—my wife, my father, and my mother—this book is gratefully dedicated.



Pentecost 1983

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

When *Space for God* was published in 1983, I never dreamed that my journey would intersect with the journeys of so many people who not only bought the book but read it—and even tried to follow some of the suggestions! They've responded with encouraging remarks, personal experiences, and suggestions. This revision takes those suggestions into account. The basic text has not been substantially changed but past mistakes have been corrected, some readings have been added or rearranged, and newer versions of the Bible have been included. I've also added a few spiritual exercises that I've found useful as I continue to give courses and retreats on spirituality and prayer.

It's a mystery to me that something squeezed from my brain, my pain, my joy, and my heart would touch the experience of so many others. How stimulating and enriching to interact with people from various denominations and religious traditions from West Africa to Japan, from Malaysia to Mexico, from Canada to Costa Rica, and from all parts of the United States. Their warm response has been an overwhelming experience for which I am profoundly grateful.

My journey took me to the Vincent Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam where *Space for God* is on the library shelf. The curator graciously invited me into the vault to view the drawings included in this book. In a visit to the Ecumenical Community of Taizé, France, I found music and a meditative

style of worship that deepened my spiritual life, enhanced my teaching of *Space for God*, and has become an integral part of my ministry.

My journey also took me not only to places and persons I never dreamed of but also to deeper places in my own heart. I have found that “belonging to God” is a very basic spiritual experience as well as a theological concept, not only for Christians in the Reformed tradition but in other traditions as well. And a “spirituality of gratitude” also connects with people of many traditions in many places.

This journey of befriending many deeply spiritual people has deepened my own friendship with God. In fact, I’ve come to believe that being a friend of God is a deeper basis for spirituality and prayer than being a servant or even a child of God. I’ve developed this theme in a new book called *Catch Your Breath* (CRC Publications).

All these experiences have changed my life and given me a new focus for the future. They have influenced my decision to move from a campus ministry to a ministry of giving retreats, conferences, and spiritual direction. Once again, I am grateful to Campus Chapel for the support given to me over thirty-four years to explore and expand my ministry in the direction God seemed to be leading.

A clergy friend once said to me, “I hope you can *do* what you’ve written about.” What a challenge! It made me realize I’m still very much on the journey. I’m honored that you’ve joined me on this journey as we try to live as friends of God.

I close with a few thoughts about my friend Henri Nouwen, author of the preface to this book. I remember how

deeply moved I was when I first received the preface from him. He had caught the essence of my book and expanded gratitude further than I had thought—into a basis of reconciliation and unity. I remember thinking that the preface was the best part of the book! I remember how we shared a passion for Vincent Van Gogh and how Henri had enlarged my understanding of the spirituality of his art so that it found a place in this book. Even the title of this book—*Space for God*—came from Henri. While I was studying with him, he had written a book he called *Space for God*, but his publishers had rejected the title. When I asked him if I could use his title for my book, he said yes!

Little did I realize that on September 21, 1996, the very day I was contemplating his words and putting them into a sermon for the next morning, Henri had died of a massive heart attack. I found out two days later. What a loss! Yet what an inspiration to know this beloved friend of God as our friend. What a gift he was and is to people around the world who are on the journey with the Spirit.

In gratitude, this revision is dedicated to the memory of my friend and mentor, Henri Nouwen.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donald A. Pasternak". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline.

Epiphany 1997

... AND CONTINUES

As I continue on the spiritual journey, I realize more and more that it is not about a destination but about a relationship. It is not about striving to get to God someplace in the future. It is more about being with God, who is persistently present with us. We do not travel alone. The risen Christ is our constant companion on the way, as he was with Cleopas and his wife on the way to Emmaus. His Spirit is always present to comfort, cajole, care, challenge, instruct, encourage, and inspire us on the path of holiness ("sanctification").

Our role is to recognize Jesus, to pay attention to the Divine Presence, to be conscious of God on the way. *Space for God* was written as a guide along the way to cultivating such a God-conscious life. It is an invitation to a spirituality and prayer that "draws down the attention of the mind into the heart . . . [and] with the mind firmly established in the heart, stands before the Lord with awe, reverence, and devotion" (Theophane the Recluse). That perspective influenced my writing. How surprising that something conceived in the heart and mind can travel down the arm and come out of the fingers with words on a page! John Henry Cardinal Newman expressed it for me: "I pray best at the end of my pen." I remember writing the first draft with pencil so it seemed more like drawing: a rough sketch that little by little, by filling in with a thought or experience, pondering and reworking the material, became a portrait of the spiritual life.

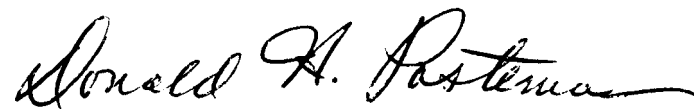
However, once the words are written, printed, and published, they become like freeze-dried experience. Until read-

ers immerse them in the warmth of their own experience and they come alive again. Until the Spirit waters them with inspiration, like hot water poured on tea for a refreshing brew.

The book has taken on a life of its own; for almost twenty-five years it has been on a journey around the world . . . even speaking Russian. It seems to have a ministry of its own. Or is it the Divine Companion who has a ministry through it?

It is still a mystery to me that so many people have chosen *Space for God* as one of their guides to accompany them on the spiritual journey. This has confirmed and deepened my conviction that a spirituality of grace, gratitude, and compassion that is at the heart of the Reformed faith can touch the heart of other people of faith. I simply have observed all this with surprise and gratitude. Meister Eckhardt once said that if you come to the end of your life and the only prayer you have uttered is "Thank You," that is enough.

As this new printing goes out on its journey, I continue to say "Thank You"—to you readers who have made that possible, to the publishers who trust the process . . . but especially to God, who is full of surprises and, I imagine, has a few more surprises in store for us on the way.



Easter 2007

CHAPTER 1

MAKING SPACE

I must grasp life at its depth.

—Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters*, 197, I, 365

*Be still before the LORD
and wait patiently for him.*

—Psalm 37:7, NRSV

*What do you believe when you say:
“I believe in God the Father, Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth”?*

*That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who out of nothing created heaven and earth
and everything in them,
who still upholds and rules them
by his eternal counsel and providence,
is my God and Father
because of Christ his Son.*

*I trust him so much that I do not doubt
he will provide
whatever I need
for body and soul,
and he will turn to my good
whatever adversity he sends me
in this sad world.*

*He is able to do this because he is almighty God,
he desires to do it because he is a faithful Father.*

—Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 26



Bent Figure of a Woman

—Vincent Van Gogh

REFLECTION

“Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?” Emily, a young woman in Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town* asks that question.

In the play Emily dies in childbirth but is granted a unique experience: the Stage Manager allows her to return from death and live one day of her life with her family. Although Emily has high hopes for that one day, she is disappointed. Just before she returns to her place in the cemetery, she reveals her frustration to the Stage Manager:

Emily: We don’t have time to look at one another. (She breaks down, sobbing.) I didn’t realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. . . .
Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?

Stage Manager: No. (Pause) The saints and poets, maybe—they do some.¹

Emily’s observation challenges us to live with awareness, realizing “life while [we] live it—every, every minute.” We need to be reminded to appreciate all that is going on around

us and inside of us, to be in touch with other people and ourselves, to be mindful of God.

Artists (like the “poets” the Stage Manager mentions) certainly need this kind of awareness to write, or paint, or draw with any authenticity. They need to *pay attention* to what is around them and inside of them. They must take time to penetrate below the surface of things, to rediscover the world with an eye of love, and to “see” into reality. Being an artist involves “grasping life in its depth,” as the sensitive artist Vincent Van Gogh once wrote.²

But artists are not the only people who must grasp life deeply. Every person can be viewed as a special kind of artist; we are artists of our own lives. If we are to live with any authenticity, we must join those “saints and poets” who grasp life at its depth.

To live so deeply is a special challenge, for it is so easy to be superficial. We are so busy! We have so many urgent things to do, so many people to meet, so many books to read, so many events to attend. Either our jobs demand time and overtime, or we are unemployed and spend much of our time either looking for work or worrying about not finding it. Our families need lots of time and energy. Our studies could fill every working hour. Our houses or apartments or yards beg for our attention. We promise to do things for the church or for community organizations. Problems in many

parts of the world concern us, and we are frustrated by not being able to do anything. We simply don't have the time—our calendars are filled with appointments: doctors, dentists, music lessons, potlucks, concerts, sporting events, meetings. . . .

Someday, after driving the children around, or mowing the lawn, or putting in some overtime, or coming in from a ball game, you might fall exhausted in a chair. And maybe, instead of falling asleep, your mind will look over the day with its knocks and opportunities. You may even find some questions lingering around the edges: "What am I doing in all this activity and noise? Where am I going?" Or maybe even that age-old irritator, "Who am I?" If you read poetry, you may remember T. S. Eliot:

*Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word. . . .*

*Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?³*

Perhaps we need to flop into a chair more often—before we are exhausted. We need more leisure time to touch those inner dimensions of our lives, to ask some fundamental questions, or just to be.

Leisure is not the inevitable result of spare time, a holiday, a weekend or a vacation. It is, in the first place, an attitude of mind, a condition of the soul. . . . Leisure implies . . . an attitude of nonactivity, of inward calm, of silence, it means not being "busy," but letting things happen. Leisure is a form of silence, of that silence which is the prerequisite of the apprehension of reality: only the silent hear and those who do not remain silent do not hear.

Silence, as it is used in this context, does not mean "dumbness" or "noiselessness"; it means more nearly that the soul's power to "answer" to the reality of the world is left undisturbed. For leisure is a receptive attitude of mind, a contemplative attitude, and it is not only the occasion but also the capacity for steeping oneself in the whole of creation. . . .

Leisure is not the attitude of mind of those who actively intervene, but of those who are open to everything; not of those who grab and grab hold, but of those who leave the reins loose and who are free and easy themselves—almost like someone falling asleep, for one can only fall asleep by "letting oneself go." . . . When we really let our minds rest contemplatively on a rose in bud, on a child at play, on a divine mystery, we are rested and quickened as though by a dreamless sleep. . . . It is in these silent receptive moments that the soul of man is sometimes visited by an awareness of what holds the world together.⁴

Such an attitude pits us against compulsive busyness, against drivenness. It leads toward solitude and contemplation—toward creating an inner receptivity, a space where we can hear our deepest longings, realize what life is about, penetrate into reality. It can mean making a space for God. It is prayer.

Jesus was a very busy person (Mark 6:31), so busy that his friends thought he would go mad (Mark 3:20-21). He was seldom left alone. So he had to make time to be alone, to give undivided attention to God, to pray (Mark 1:35; 6:46-47; 14:32-42; Matt. 14:22-25; 26:36-46; Luke 4:42; 6:12-13; 11:1-2; 22:39-46). Those times must have given him "awareness of what holds the world together," of his own identity, of his mission, and of his relationship with God.

If Jesus needed such solitude for prayer, for listening to God, we certainly do! Martin Luther once said, "I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours

daily in prayer.”⁵ I usually do just the opposite: the busier I am, the less I pray. When I was writing the first version of this book, I remember having so much to do that I hardly found time to pray. Many people share and understand that problem. It’s the opposite extreme they are suspicious of. If I told you that I had no trouble finding time to pray, that I spent three hours *every day* in prayer, you might wonder if I was very “productive.” You might even think I was wasting time, or not earning my pay. What would people think if you did that?

Well, it takes time to stop for contemplation and prayer. It also takes courage.

I went on a weeklong silent retreat. The first night the director of the retreat told us to set up a daily schedule that included five hour-long periods of prayer. I went to my room and began setting up my books, rearranging the furniture. I went to the kitchen to see whether there was anything to eat. I took a nap—anything to avoid making that schedule, to avoid entering silence for prayer.

Gradually I realized that I was afraid. I could hardly pray for fifteen minutes; now I had to pray for five hours! Then I read a text assigned to me, words that Haggai had written for people rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem: “Take heart. . . . Begin the work, for I am with you, says the Lord of Hosts, and my spirit is present among you. Have no fear” (2:4-5, NEB). I needed that.

Since most of what we learn and hear urges us to hustle, chase, and cram, it takes courage to stop for leisure—and especially to stop for prayer. But what’s more wasteful—to push hard until we drop, dead tired, or to be quiet and perhaps touch the depth of life? Isaiah seems to speak to us as we rush around:

*Thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel,
“In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.”
And you would not, but you said,
“No! We will speed upon our horses”
[or cars or planes—or we will just run the rat race].*

—30:15-16, RSV

“It is hard to leave our people, our job, and the hectic places where we are needed, in order to be with the One from whom all good things come.” Yet, once we flop in the chair, we realize we need such a time, such a place for God. And such a time as this “can unmask the illusion of busyness, usefulness, and indispensability. It is a way of being empty and useless in the presence of God and of proclaiming our basic belief that all is grace and nothing is simply the result of hard work.”⁶

The world really doesn’t need more busy people, maybe not even more intelligent people. It needs “deep people,”⁷ people who know that they need

solitude, if they are going to find out who they are;
silence, if their words are to mean anything;
reflection, if their actions are to have any
significance;
contemplation, if they are to see the world as
it really is;
prayer, if they are going to be conscious of God,
if they are to “know God and enjoy God forever.”

The world needs people who want their lives not only to be filled, but to be full and fulfilled. If we are to be artists of our lives, we need to be in touch with the One who is “a greater artist than all other artists . . . [who] made neither statues nor pictures nor books; but loudly proclaimed that he made . . . *living men, immortals.*”⁸ The world needs people who will allow time for God to recreate them, play with them, touch them as an Artist who is making something beautiful with their lives.

This book is for busy people who also want to be deep people. It is a book that explores spirituality, “a way of living in depth.”⁹ Spirituality has to do with being in touch with our spirit and with the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:14-17; 1 Cor. 2:9-13). It is a way of being awake to the world around us and in us, of making space for God.

This book is about the spiritual life, or about “sanctification,” as theologians sometimes call it. It is about living a life for God in our world. More specifically, it is about prayer, prayer which is based on the realization that we belong to God and thus live our lives saying thanks to God. It is meant to encourage you to know God, to enjoy God forever, and in the process, to touch life at some depth. It is concerned to show that such a spirituality and prayerful or contemplative life is not only meant for “saints” but for all God’s people, as they go to office or lab, change diapers, fix the car, study, or drive the tractor.

I stayed in a monastery for four days. I went to the seven services of prayer and worship that the monks have each day—beginning at 2:30 A.M. Toward the end of my stay I asked the abbot how I could continue some kind of regular discipline of prayer. I explained that it had been relatively easy to find time for prayer during my stay in the monastery, where it was all structured for me and it was a novelty. But what about when I was back on the job? He said, “The first thing is that you have to want to pray.” No amount of discipline or exercise or reading will do it if there is no desire.

This book presupposes that you want to deepen your life and your prayers—and also that you would like to learn some new ways to pray. It was written to help you experience and practice various ways of praying, to discuss them with others, and to expand the possibilities of prayer in your life. You are invited to do the exercises as suggested. Later, as you develop a discipline of prayer, you can discuss and perhaps adapt these exercises to your personal use. If you

choose not to do these exercises each day, you will lose the main intent and experience of the course.

You may feel awkward at first doing these spiritual exercises. That’s OK. You are still asked to do them, to learn what they involve. Even if you’ve already found a satisfactory way to pray, you are encouraged to complete these exercises—to expand and enrich what you are already doing.

This course is intended not just for thought and discussion, but for making space in your day for God—for prayer. We usually give God the leftover time of our day. But since there is hardly enough time in a day for all we have to do, there is very little leftover time. I hope you will explore times and ways of being aware of God, of living in God’s presence.

Making space for God takes some discipline. At first it may sound like one more thing you “have to do” in your already hassled life. But, as you know, it takes discipline to do anything well, and it is no different with prayer. We make appointments with everyone. Maybe we should make an appointment also with God.

I used to write in my daily calendar “7-7:30 A.M.—Prayer.” But many times I passed that up. It was one more thing to pass by that day. Now I write “7-7:30 A.M.—God.” Somehow that’s a little harder to neglect.

However, by all means be gentle with yourself. We get so down on ourselves when we attempt something and fail to do it or fail in doing it. We can do the same with prayer. We can get down on ourselves, think we are not “doing as well as others,” punish ourselves, get more rigidly determined, and want to forget it all. Remember, prayer takes time and practice. So be gentle. And make whatever happens a part of your conversation with God.

Thomas Merton, who spoke from experience, gave a helpful reminder:

In the spiritual life there are no tricks and no short cuts. . . . One cannot begin to face the real difficulties of the life of prayer and meditation unless one is first perfectly content to be a beginner and really experience oneself as one who knows little or nothing, and has a desperate need to learn the bare rudiments. Those who think they “know” from the beginning never, in fact, come to know anything. . . .

We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life.¹⁰

Even as I write this book, I realize how much of a beginner I am. I invite you to explore with me some Scripture, some thoughts, some exercises, some readings that I have found useful as I continue to begin a discipline of spirituality and prayer.

* * *

The chapters in this book are all organized in the same way. They begin with my own Reflection on the topic of the chapter. This Reflection is followed by readings, called Windows to Insight, which you can use as a basis for your own daily reflection on the topic. The readings include Scripture, hymns, a saying from the Desert Fathers (people from the third and fourth centuries who went into the Egyptian desert to live a life of silence, solitude, and prayer)¹¹, and other selections from a variety of writers in a variety of religious traditions.

Any choice of readings will be limited, arbitrary, and very personal. The selections I chose to include in this book are some that have helped me see beyond my own narrow viewpoint. Perhaps you will want to look at the books from which the excerpts came. These writers can be guides who do not ask for imitation, but invite you to search.

These readings are not meant as dogmatic statements or as statements with which you will always agree. If one does not appeal to you, go to another that does. Then stop and

reflect on it. You may find yourself coming back to excerpts that you passed over and learning to appreciate them. These selections are meant to stimulate your own reflection and meditation. I hope they become windows through which you view a broad landscape of insights into prayer and the spiritual life.

Following Windows to Insight are some exercises that you are asked to do at home each day and in your group sessions. When the exercises call for a written response, please do your writing in your own journal (any notebook with lots of blank pages will do). The exercises may seem strange at first, but you are encouraged to do them anyway. They will help you experience many different forms of prayer so that by the end of this book (or course), you will be able to choose those that seem most appropriate for you.

Keeping your journal is an important part of this course, not only for recording your answers to various exercises but also for jotting down your personal thoughts, reactions, and prayers. The journal will help you both as an individual and as a member of a class by giving you material for thought and discussion.

The art in this book is not intended simply for illustration. Think of it as another means to stimulate your imagination and reflection, another window to insight. Matthew Fox asks: “Who will support and encourage us on our spiritual . . . way?” And he answers: “Certainly artists will.”¹² This has been true for me. Some artists reveal a deep insight into reality, a capacity to see beneath the surface of nature and people, an awareness that uncovers for us a spiritual vitality in our world, in ourselves—and points us toward God. What has struck me is that a truly contemplative and prayerful person seems to have a similar capacity for seeing deeply into reality, the ability to pay attention to what is beneath the surface, a willingness to concentrate long enough to catch a vision.

One of the most important—and most neglected—elements in the beginnings of the interior life is the ability to respond to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendor that is all around us in the creatures of God.¹³

If that is true, the artists included in this book have been an enormous help in nourishing my interior life. I am especially grateful to Vincent Van Gogh, whom I have known since my ninth-grade teacher took our class to an exhibit of his works at the Chicago Art Institute. In his art Van Gogh was trying to grasp life at its depth.¹⁴ Since I have found that spirituality means living in depth, I believe I have learned something of spirituality from Van Gogh. Perhaps you have a favorite artist who supports and encourages you on your spiritual way—be that artist a painter, poet, musician, sculptor, photographer, calligrapher, or whatever. A person in one of my groups asked, “Do I have to get something out of the pictures? They don’t do anything for me.” The answer is no. But they are included to show you one more way—alongside Scripture, poetry, music, and readings—that may eventually be a help to you on your spiritual journey and a stimulus to spiritual insight.

The art in this book is an invitation to awareness and contemplation using all the media available to us. An invitation to see beneath the surface of things to the Source and Creator of it all—our almighty, creative, artistic God. God, the artist who

painted the painted desert, the shades of the sea which change with each day, the pastels of the sunset, the black of a stormy night, the silver of a clearly seen Milky Way, the red of blood, the green of the earth, the yellow of grain in ripe fields, the blue of a French Impressionist sky.¹⁵

We are God’s work of art (Eph. 2:10). We are being created and recreated by the saving touch of Christ, who, Van Gogh said, “is more of an artist than the artists,” who working in living flesh and living spirit, made living people, instead of statues!¹⁶

We too become artists as we come to know our Creator more intimately.

Each of us becomes the artist as we allow ourselves to be open to the reality of the Other and give expression to that encounter either in words or paint or stone or in the fabric of our lives. Each of us who has come to know and relate to the Other and expresses this in any way is an artist in spite of himself/herself. . . . In the final analysis meditation is the art of living life in its fullest and deepest. Genuine religion and art are two names for the same incredible meeting with reality and give expression to that experience in some manner.¹⁷

Matthew Fox says it so strongly: “There is no distinction between the artist and the person who has experienced God. No experiencer of God is not an artist.”¹⁸

For these reasons I have included works of a few artists who may open up ways for us to be more aware of life and the creative Source of life.

FOOTNOTES

1. Wilder, *Our Town*, 100.
2. Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, 197, I, 365.
3. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" *Collected Poems 1909-1935*.
4. Piper, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, 40-42.
5. Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline*, 31.
6. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*, 51-52.
7. Foster, 1.
8. Van Gogh, B8, III, 496.
9. Fox, *Whee, Wee, We—All the Way Home*, I.
10. Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, 52-53.
11. I included sayings from the Desert Fathers because I thought it would be interesting and challenging for readers to get to know these early guides in the spiritual life. Some books that have introduced them to me are:
 - Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*
 - Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*
 - Nomura, *Desert Wisdom; Sayings from the Desert Fathers*
 - Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*
12. Fox, 189.
13. Merton, from *A Thomas Merton Reader*, edited by Thomas P. McDonnell, 386-7.
14. Van Gogh, 197, I, 365.
15. Fox, 82.
16. Van Gogh, B9, III, 499.
17. Kelsey, *The Other Side of Silence, A Guide to Christian Meditation*, 27.
18. Fox, 85.

WINDOWS TO INSIGHT

*I . . . wrestle with nature long enough for her to tell me
her secret.*

—Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters*, 393, II, 348

*I do not invent the whole picture;
on the contrary, I find it all ready in nature,
only it must be disentangled.*

—Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters*, B19, III, 518

*The Fountain
in the Garden of St. Paul's Hospital*

—Vincent Van Gogh



LONGING FOR GOD

*Like a deer that yearns
for running streams,
so my soul is yearning
for you, my God.*

*My soul is thirsting for God,
the God of my life;
when can I enter and see
the face of God?*

*My tears have become my bread,
by night, by day,
as I hear it said all the day long:
“Where is your God?”*

*These things will I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I would lead the rejoicing crowd
into the house of God,
amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving,
the throngs wild with joy.*

*Why are you cast down, my soul,
why groan within me?
Hope in God; I will still praise the Lord,
my savior and my God.*

—Psalm 42:1-5, *A New Translation*

THIRSTING AFTER THE LIVING GOD

Not twenty centuries and more have been able to darken the golden glow of the immortal song that has come to us in the forty-second Psalm . . . in which the home-sickness of our human heart cries after the Source of our life.

What here grips so mightily is the ardent fervor that breathes throughout this whole psalm, the passionate outpouring of soul. . . . In this psalm the heart itself pushes and drives. It is not from without but from the inner chamber of the heart that the home-sickness after the living God irresistibly wells upward. . . .

“My souls pants, yea, thirsts after the living God.” Not after a Creed regarding God, not after an idea of God, not after a remembrance of God, not after a Divine Majesty, that, far removed from the soul, stands over against it as a God in words or in phrases, but after God Himself, after God in His holy outpouring of strength and grace, after God Who is alive, Who . . . in holy exhibition of love reveals Himself to you and in you as the living God.

You feel that all learning falls away, all dogma, all formulas, everything that is external and abstract, everything that exhausts itself in words. . . . It is not your idea, not your understanding, not your thinking, not your reasoning, not even your profession of faith, that here can quench the thirst. The home-sickness goes out after God Himself. . . . It is not the Name of God but God Himself Whom your soul desires and can not do without.

—Abraham Kuyper, *To Be Near unto God*, pp. 671-675



Abba Poemen said about Abba Pior that every single day he made a fresh beginning .

—Yushi Nomura, *Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers*, p. 1

JESUS AT PRAYER

[Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side [of the lake], while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. . . . And in the fourth watch of the night [between three and six a.m.!] he came to them, walking on the seas.

—Matthew 14:22-25, RSV

That evening after sunset they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by devils; and the whole town was there, gathered at the door. He healed many who suffered from various diseases. . . . Very early next morning he got up and went out. He went away to a lonely spot and remained there in prayer.

—Mark 1:32-35, NEB

TOO “BUSY”

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is the one who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

—Luke 14:16-24, NRSV

COVENANT

*God
knocks at my door
seeking a home for his son.*

Rent is cheap, I say.

I don't want to rent. I want to buy, says God.

*I'm not sure I want to sell,
but you might come in to look around.*

I think I will, says God.

I might let you have a room or two.

*I like it, says God. I'll take the two.
You might decide to give me more some day.
I can wait, says God.*

*I'd like to give you more,
but it's a bit difficult. I need some space for me.*

I know, says God, but I'll wait. I like what I see.

*Hm, maybe I can let you have another room.
I really don't need that much.*

Thanks, says God, I'll take it. I like what I see.

*I'd like to give you the whole house
but I'm not sure . . .*

*Think on it, says God. I wouldn't put you out.
Your house would be mine and my son would live in it.
You'd have more space that you'd ever had before.*

I don't understand at all.

*I know, says God, but I can't tell you about that.
You'll have to discover it for yourself.
That can only happen if you let me have the whole house.*

A bit risky, I say.

Yes, says God, but try me.

*I'm not sure—
I'll let you know.*

I can wait, says God. I like what I see.

—Margaret Halaska. This beautiful, unpublished poem was given to me at a retreat by someone who knew the author.

TAKE TIME TO BE HOLY

*Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord;
Abide in Him always, and feed on His Word;
Make friends of God's children, help those who are weak,
Forgetting in nothing His blessing to seek.*

*Take time to be holy, the world rushes on;
Spend much time in secret with Jesus alone;
By looking to Jesus, like Him thou shalt be;
Thy friends in thy conduct His likeness shall see.*

*Take time to be holy, let Him be thy Guide,
And run not before Him, whatever betide;
In joy or in sorrow still follow thy Lord,
And looking to Jesus, still trust in His Word.*

*Take time to be holy, be calm in thy soul;
Each thought and each motive beneath His control;
Thus led by His Spirit to fountains of love,
Thou soon shalt be fitted for service above.*

—William D. Longstaff, 1822-1894

PRAYER IS THE SOUL'S SINCERE DESIRE

*Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Unuttered or expressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.*

*Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of the eye,
When none but God is near.*

*Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air,
A watchword at the gates of death;
We enter heaven with prayer.*

*Prayer is the contrite sinner's voice,
Returning from his ways,
While angels in their songs rejoice
And cry, "Behold, he prays!"*

*O Thou by whom we come to God,
The life, the truth, the way,
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod:
Lord, teach us how to pray.*

—James Montgomery, 1771-1854

THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

The contemplative life is the God-conscious life. It is the life that knows its end and can rest in that knowledge. The Psalmist spoke of it: Be still, and know that I am God. We read of it in Hebrews: There remaineth a rest for the people of God.

John Calvin put it into the first question and answer of his Genevan Catechism. His question was fundamental: What is the chief end of man? And his answer was crystal-clear: To know God and enjoy Him forever. That is the eternal Sabbath which begins here: Delight in the knowledge of God. . . .

The knowledge of God is proper to us as creatures, and it satisfies. That is the finest fruit of the contemplative life: to know and enjoy God. No one will care to ask what such enjoyment is for. It is enough for us. So far from being caught in the web of natural process, snared in the fatality of endless busyness, we can rest in that knowledge.

For man is a creature who can know. . . .

We see that once back there in Paradise. When God had done making the animals, we read this: "And the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air, and brought them unto Adam to see what he would name them." There we have it: a mind to know and to name. The capacity for conscious appreciation. The leisure, the spiritual freedom, to enjoy. Man, conscious reflector of the glory. Homo sapiens, man knowing, not quite submerged in homo faber, man doing. Homo ludens, even, man as artist, man playing. The knowledge of God, which begins in the saving knowledge of Grace through faith, makes for rest and enjoyment. That is the finest fruit of the contemplative life.

Contemplation itself, of course, is not indolence; it is not idle. The saints work hard. Mary's effort at the feet was no easier than Martha's in the kitchen. Gethsemane is unique for its ardor. Jacob wrestled in prayer. Contemplation represents not an escape from drudgery into entertainment, but the positive education of leisure. Some people are too lazy to engage in it, too bored to be still. It embarrasses them, the confrontation in solitude of self, and God, and destiny. Robert Louis Stevenson, perhaps with tongue in cheek, once wrote this of such persons: "There is a sort of dead-alive . . . people about, who are scarcely conscious of living except in the exercise of some conventional occupation. . . . They have dwarfed and narrowed their soul by a life of all work, until here they are at forty, with a listless attention, a mind vacant of all material for amusement, and not one thought to rub against another while waiting for the train."

In its deeper levels this of Stevenson is a kind of boredom too, a boredom springing from neglect of the contemplative life. For boredom also is an earmark of life in our day. The poets have seen it and are good reporters. "Ennui, ennui, ennui," says Christopher Fry in a recent drama, and he toasts the vanity of a purposeless life with a yawn. It had been Oscar Wilde's final dread. "The only horrible thing," he had said, "the only horrible thing in the world is ennui." It is horrible, of course. When we cannot find God, we cannot find his world and his wonders. Or finding these, we can only use and exploit them; we cannot appreciate and enjoy them.

—Henry Zylstra, *The Testament of Vision*, pp. 185, 187, 188

PERSEVERANCE IN PRAYER

*Lifting up our hearts,
We should ever aspire to God
And pray without ceasing.
Still, such is our weakness
It must be supported by many helps,
Such our sluggishness
It needs to be goaded.
Consequently fitting it is
That each one of us should set apart
Certain hours for this exercise,
Hours that should not pass without prayer,
Hours when all the heart's devotion
Should completely engage in prayer.*

*When should we pray?
Upon arising in the morning,
Before we begin daily work,
When we sit down to a meal,
When by God's blessing we have eaten,
When we are preparing to retire.*

*No superstitious observance of hours, this,
Whereby, as if paying our debt to God,
We fancy ourselves paid up
For the remaining hours.
No, it must be a tutelage for our weakness,
Exercised and repeatedly stimulated.
Whenever we are pressed
Or see others pressed
By any adversity,
Let us hasten back to God,
Not with swift feet
But with eager hearts;
On the other hand,
Let us not permit the prosperity
Of ourselves or others to go unnoticed,
Failing to testify, by praise and thanksgiving,
That we discern God's hand therein.*

—John Calvin, *The Piety of John Calvin* by Ford Lewis Battles, pp. 111-112

A child in the cradle, if you watch it at leisure, has the infinite in its eyes.

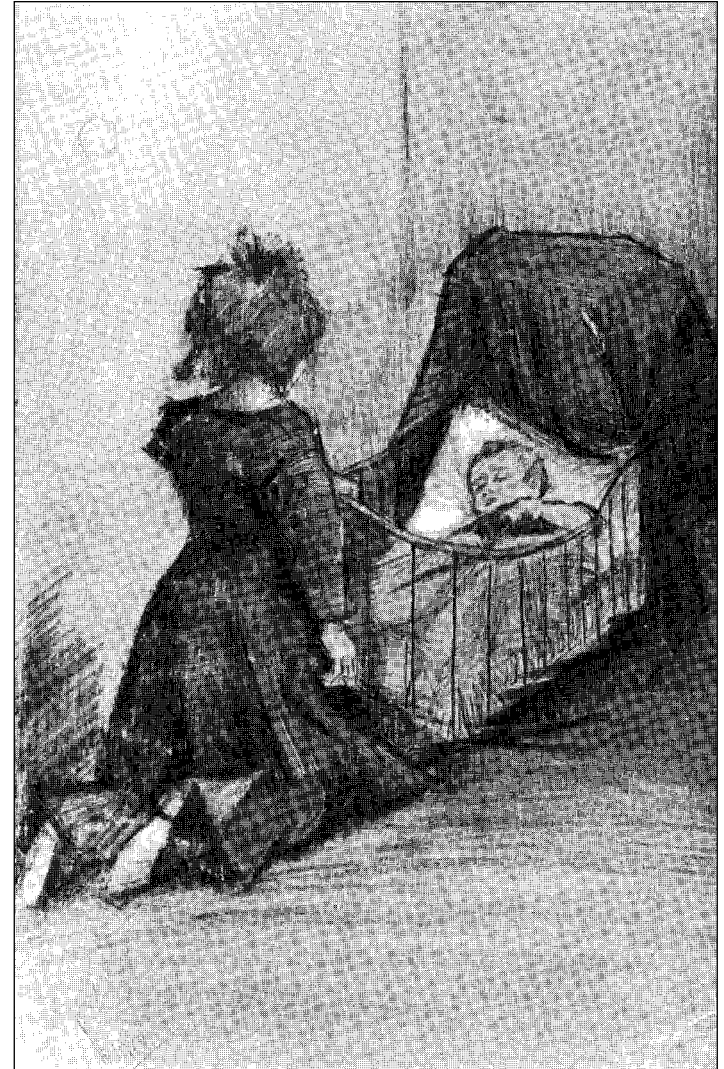
—Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters*, 518, III, 2

If one feels the need of something grand, something infinite, something that makes one feel aware of God, one need not go far to find it. I think I see something deeper, more infinite, more eternal than the ocean in the expression of the eyes of a little baby when it wakes in the morning, and coos or laughs because it sees the sun shining on its cradle.

—Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters*, 242, I, 483

Girl Kneeling in Front of a Cradle

—Vincent Van Gogh



EXERCISES

In Session

Reflect on your experience. Is it easy or hard for you to find time to pray, to make space for God in your life? Write down some things that keep you from prayer or from pursuing your spiritual life. Are there thoughts, ideas, attitudes, feelings that might keep you from spending time with God? Are there any ideas that could be reexamined, any attitudes that could be changed, any activities that could be shifted, any priorities that could be rearranged so you would be able to make some time and space for God each day?

At Home

1. Set aside ten to fifteen minutes each day this week to read and reflect on chapter 1. The first day read Reflection; the other days read Windows to Insight. Spend some of the

time thinking about what you read. You are also encouraged to jot down your personal reactions and insights in your journal.

Since you will be doing this kind of reading and reflecting throughout the course, please try to decide when you can make this ten to fifteen minutes available each day. If possible, also decide where you'll be doing your reading and reflecting.

2. Beginning next week, after the second session, you'll be asked to set aside five minutes each day for morning prayers. This week, try to decide on a time for your morning prayers (generally, the closer to the beginning of the day, the better). Also, try to decide on the place for your morning prayers. Record your decision in your journal. Please bring this book and your journal to the next session.