

THE WILD HAWK OF THE MIND

From

Into the Silent Land: A guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation

Martin Laird

Oxford University Press, 2006

*Hands do what you're bid:
Bring the balloon of the mind
That bellies and drags in the wind
Into its narrow shed.*

—W B. Yeats

Too fidgety the mind's compass.

—R. S. Thomas

When pummeled 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."

Followers of the Christian path have been singing this song of silence for centuries. In his Confessions St. Augustine goes so far as to say that the discovery of the various levels of silence is what it means to "Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Mt 25: 21). St. John Climacus says, "The friend of silence comes close to God." Meister Eckhart says, "The noblest attainment in this life is to be silent and let God work and speak within." John of the Cross says, "The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son, and this Word He always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul." In the Cherubic Wanderer Angelus Silesius says, "God far exceeds all words that we can here express. In silence he is heard, in silence

worshipped best.”

What is this silence? It is certainly more than the mere absence of physical sound. More important to realize, however, is that this ineffable reality that the word "silence" points to is not something that we need to acquire, like a piece of software we can install in the computer of our spiritual lives. It is pointing to something that is already within us, grounding all mental processes, whether precise, disciplined thinking or chaotic mental obsession.

Learned Ignorance And The Ground Of Silence

Alice and George were getting ready to celebrate their sixtieth wedding anniversary. They wanted to show me photos of grandchildren born since the celebration of their fiftieth anniversary. Alice called for George to produce the photos, and he began to fumble through various pockets, saying at each, "Right. Here they are," only to produce a hanky, a pipe, spectacles missing since last Christmas, everything but the photos in question. George suddenly remarked, "Oh dear, I changed jackets just before we left. They must be at home in the other jacket." There were some disapproving looks and muttering coming from the direction of Alice. He excused himself to go to the men's room. When he was just out of earshot (about ten feet), Alice sighed in exasperation and said, "I know him like the back of my hand but I'll never understand him." The statement was followed by engaged silence, and the moment was thick with meaning. I think anyone would understand the point she is making. In fact she is drawing an important distinction between different ways of knowing.

She is aware that there is her thinking mind, or to use a more technical term, her discursive reason—that aspect of consciousness we all use to master facts and understand things like bank balances, shopping lists, mathematics, anniversary celebrations, the behavior of spouses. But she is also aware that this level of her mind cannot grasp, cannot comprehend, all there is to her husband. And yet there is every sense of deep familiarity and real communion with this level of person where the comprehension of discursive reason does not reach. "I know him like the back of my hand but I will never understand him." Her unknowing goes deeper than her knowing, and in this depth is communion. And so it is with our life in God.

Our unknowing goes deeper into God than our knowing goes. Seasoned familiarity with God, yet complete incomprehension of God moved Augustine to call this deeper dimension of awareness "learned ignorance."

Our information culture, however, exalts discursive, logical reason as the most noteworthy accomplishment of the mind. Dickens delighted in poking fun at this with wicked sarcasm in the opening lines of *Hard Times*. "Now what we want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, rout out everything else. In this life we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!" The thinking mind is indeed a marvel, but simple life experience, such as that of Alice, suggests that thinking is not the only aspect of awareness. There are deeper dimensions that must be awakened and engaged; in fact the contemplative tradition has claimed this for centuries. It is crucial to see this in order to understand its fundamental orientation to prayer.

St. Augustine speaks of a higher part of the mind reserved for the contemplation of God and a lower part, of the mind that reasons. Evagrius of Pontus, a fourth-century monk, is one of a host of contemplative writers to make an important distinction between the calculating, reasoning mind that makes use of concepts in a process we call ratiocination or discursive thought, and that dimension of mind that comes to knowledge directly, without the mediation of concepts. This later he called *nous*, an intuitive spiritual intelligence. And so when he defines prayer as "communion of the mind with God," he means a dimension of our consciousness that runs deeper than the discursive process of ratiocination. Alice can know George in a deep way and still not know everything about George (perhaps even next to nothing). "I know him like the back of my hand but I'll never understand him." Likewise we can speak of knowing God without thinking that our thoughts and words actually grasp God. These are different forms of knowing, different

forms of awareness. St. Thomas Aquinas takes up this same distinction and can be said to speak for virtually the entire tradition when he calls this aspect of mind that thinks and calculates "lower reason" (ratio inferior) and that aspect of the mind that communes directly with God in contemplation "higher reason" (ratio superior)." Standing on the shoulders of everyone, Dante states it most succinctly in *The Divine Comedy*, "Reason, even when supported by senses, has short wings."

Closer perhaps to our own sensibilities is someone like St. Diadochos who distinguishes between the mind and the heart. He uses the term "heart" to refer to this non-conceptual form of knowing, what Augustine and Aquinas will later call "higher reason." For Diadochos, and indeed for many others after him, the heart was not the seat of emotions (emotions would be located at roughly the same level as thoughts) but the deep center of the person. The heart communes with God in a silent and direct way that the conceptual level of our mind does not.

Writing much later but from this same spiritual tradition is a remarkably gentle and insightful monk, Theophan, who says, "You must descend from your head to your heart. At present your thoughts of God are in your head. And God Himself is, as it were, outside you, and so your prayer and other spiritual exercises remain exterior. Whilst you are still in your head, thoughts will not easily be subdued but will always be whirling about, like snow in winter or clouds of mosquitoes in the summer."

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 fizzles 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," to stretch Theophan's term a bit. In fact, precisely because we think our lives, think our spirituality, think about God, we end up perceiving God as some 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."

"What riches does every person have inside without needing to dig!" God is the ground of our being, and union with God is foundational to our humanity. "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you" (Jer 1:5). And God still knows us in this way. As the Psalmist sings, "You know me through and through" (Ps 139:14).

Yet we don't normally have much awareness of this most fundamental reality. We go off in search of what has from all eternity sought and found us. This setting off in the wrong direction sustains a profound moral and intellectual ignorance, whose fruit is a sense of alienation from God, from self, from others. God is the ground of our innermost being, yet we skim along on the surface of life. The result is that our lives are rather like that of the deep-sea fisherman who was fishing for minnows while standing on a whale. "You were within me and I was outside myself," as Augustine famously put it.

This sense of separation from God and from one another, this profound ignorance of our innermost depths, presents a singularly convincing case. This is the human condition, and we have all eaten of this fruit. But this is a lie. It is a lie spun largely out of inner noise and mental clutter. It is the inner video that plays again and again and again and steals our attention so that we overlook the simplest of truths: we are already one with God. The Christian contemplative tradition addresses this very problem by exposing the lie and introducing stillness to the mental chatter.

In the three chapters that follow I would like to discuss some of the basics of contemplative practice: how the body's own physical stillness in prayer contributes immensely to the cultivation of interior stillness; how the use of a prayer word addresses the problem of the wandering mind; how to meet the many distractions that will try, sift, and train anyone who would enter this silent land of our own being.