

**“Quit Your Tents. Pray Without Ceasing.”  
by Donne Hayden**

The wind we had a few weeks ago reminded me of my childhood on the eastern plains of New Mexico. The wind blows all the time there—it blows sand in the summer and snow in the winter. Wind sweeps across the prairie unhindered; there are no trees or ridges for it to come up against—just a flat clear swath of open land for the wind to blow across, its own fury feeding and increasing it. I have a concern with the violence, which, like a prairie wind, swirls all around us and seems to be increasing. Obviously violence pervades in those places on the planet where there is war. But even here in this country where we are not being constantly bombed, we are constantly *bombarded* with news of war, news of violent acts. Some of us can't seem to get enough; our entertainment is filled with violence, and viewers have become so accustomed to violence that filmmakers constantly push the limits to keep the novelty factor. What a great deal of time, energy and thought goes into violence! If it were our god and we worshipped it, we couldn't devote more of our attention to it.

I am referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson's comment that "A person will worship something—have no doubt about that," he says;

*That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.*<sup>1</sup>

Thoughts are energy; what we think about is important. It's an old idea, known in every religious tradition and finally acknowledged even among contemporary social scientists and psychologists, that what people think can affect external reality. Perhaps,

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<sup>1</sup> Reading 563 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 1993.

if enough of us think in a certain direction, we can actually change the world. Right now, it seems to me more people are focusing on and visualizing war and violence than on peace and compassion (As I said, it's an old idea: remember the bumper sticker: "visualize whirled peas"?)

In fact, this is ancient wisdom that we ignore at our peril.

Another word for "thinking positively" is prayer (providing of course one is not praying for bad things to happen to others). I would like to explore this ancient wisdom by working backwards from a passage in Annie Dillard's essay, "Teaching A Stone to Talk." She writes:

*At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding, or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread. You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is the silence. The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega. It is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blended note of ten thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even to address the prayer to "World." Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing.*

Several points about this passage may particularly appeal to Friends. First the intention to "stop and be wholly attentive," which we do each week in worship. And "After a time you hear it . . . the silence is all there is." It would be a mistake to read the phrase "there is nothing there" as meaning "there is no God." Dillard goes on to name

the “nothing” as “those created objects,” “God’s brooding over the waters,” “ the blended note of ten thousand things,” and “a hum, a single chorused note everywhere the same. . . the hum is the silence.” This is the Holy Silence, the all-enveloping Quiet that occurs at certain levels of communion with the Divine; as Herman Melville said, “Silence is the one and only voice of God.”<sup>2</sup>

So Dillard begins the paragraph with the intention to be come attentive, and in that attentiveness, to come into contact with the Divine. The paragraph ends with biblical language: “Quit your tents,” (in other words, “Leave your tents, come outside”), followed by “pray without ceasing,” a phrase straight out of Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians:

*Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for good, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances . . . Do not quench the Spirit. (1 Thess. 5:17)*

The phrase “pray without ceasing” is related to passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy in the *Old Testament*. One such passage in Deuteronomy occurs with the same verses that Jesus called “the greatest commandment,” i.e. “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Here is the Old Testament version of “Pray without ceasing.”

*Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away,*

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Entering the Castle* by Caroline Myss, page 68.

*when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

These are powerful metaphors for ways to internalize the commandments—know them “by heart”; tell your children about them; speak of them wherever you are, as you go to sleep and as you wake up. “Bind them as a sign on your forehead” – internalize them; write them on the doorposts and gates—make your dwelling a place of awareness and consciousness of the Holy. (Of course, there have always been literalists; one Jewish tradition involves the use of phylacteries,<sup>3</sup> small leather boxes containing tiny pieces of paper with this and other scripture relating to the same idea. Orthodox Jews may wear phylacteries bound around their arm and/or forehead.)

In all these teachings—the Old Testament, the letters of Paul, Annie Dillard, the important idea is that one *be always aware of Holiness, of the Divine in the World, of God in our midst*. And, that one attempt to focus at all times on recognition of the Divine, focus at all times on the highest and best, on love, compassion, peace.

As Friends, what are some ways to approach this need to “pray without ceasing”? First of all, among Friends, “the true Guide is the Spirit which, like the wind, bloweth where it listeth,” so we don’t resort to formulaic prayer as a general rule. Still early Friends did use as guides for interior prayer and silent worship books written by Christian mystics. Howard Brinton, in his book *Friends for Three Hundred Years*, explains that these sources commonly acknowledged four stages in prayer “mental

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<sup>3</sup> “A phylactery is a small leather boxlike case containing four strips on which are inscribed four biblical passages: Ex. 13:1-10, 11-16; Deut. 6:4-9, 11:13-21.” (Donald K. McKim. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.) and (Paul J. Achtemeier, Ed. *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985.)

prayer, affective prayer, acquired contemplation and infused contemplation or the mystic union of the human soul with the divine.”<sup>4</sup>

Mental prayer, Brinton says, “consists, in its simplest form, of the silent repetition of a prayer which has been memorized”<sup>5</sup> and eventually, the person may go on to “use his own words, thoughts or imaginations.” This kind of prayer, the “most commonly used . . . of our tradition,” is called in Greek, “*kataphatic*,” meaning “full of content.” “Prayers of intercession, supplication, praise, confession, gratitude, thanksgiving, and renewal, whether spoken, written, sung, drawn, danced, or imagined, are all *kataphatic* prayers.”<sup>6</sup>

To continue with Brinton’s explanation of the stages of prayer, the second stage he says is the “affective prayer, “a prayer of the heart without words” in which “feeling is more prominent than idea, but some idea, such as love, gratitude, [peace] . . . may be the exclusive center of attention. This is called recollection, the re-collection of the scattered fragments of the soul into one focus of concentration at the point of deepest feeling.”<sup>7</sup>

The last two stages of prayer some of us may reach, according to “the measure of Light each is given.” Brinton describes “acquired contemplation” as “the prayer of simple regard, utter simplicity. Here truth is no longer sought for, but enjoyed by a single direct glance of the soul.” The final stage, “infused contemplation,” is not

*characterized by any feeling of human effort. It is a pure, un-deserved gift of divine grace. Since its essence is love, it cannot be produced by an action of will. . . .*

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<sup>4</sup> Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for Three Hundred Years*. Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications. 1997, page 72.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> From a review of *Embracing the World: Praying for Justice and Peace* by Jane E. Vennard on The National Institute for the Renewal of the Priesthood website, <http://www.jknirp.com/vennard.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Brinton, p. 73.

*The human and the divine have flowed into each other and become one.*<sup>8</sup>

This is the *apophatic* form of prayer, from the Greek word meaning “empty, without content.”

Apophatic prayer uses no words or images, asks for nothing, desires nothing, expects nothing, receives nothing.

*This form of prayer does not give something to God, as when we offer praise, instructions, or glory. It asks nothing of God, as in intercession, supplication, or confession. Rather, apophatic prayer is a receptive form of prayer in which we empty ourselves and silently open our very souls to whatever God has to offer.*<sup>9</sup>

Every Thursday evening, between 6:30 and 8:00 p.m., I am going to come to this room and sit in candlelight. I am not personally comfortable with mental prayer, so will, as soon as possible after centering, move to affective prayer, repeating the word “peace” as necessary to keep myself focused. I know it’s a long ways out here, I know it’s time for folks to be home with family, but if someone is out at that time anyway and is so inclined, you are welcome to join me.

*“I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”*<sup>10</sup>

Though we may dismiss the idea of changing the world by praying, we have little to lose by trying it. Too many of us who abhor violence retreat to whatever sanctuary we can find or make, where we hope violence doesn’t find us. But perhaps we should quit

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<sup>8</sup> Brinton, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> From a review of *Embracing the World: Praying for Justice and Peace* by Jane E. Vennard on The National Institute for the Renewal of the Priesthood website, <http://www.jknirp.com/vennard.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Edward Everett Hale. Reading 457 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 1993.

our “tents” of nonviolence, come out of our protected sanctuaries and pay attention to the dry winds of violence and war threatening our world. Perhaps, according to “the measure of Light” we have been given, we should pray without ceasing.