

NEW SOURCES FOR A SPIRITUALITY OF THE HEART

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Every scribe who has been instructed in the Kingdom of heaven is like the head of household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.

Matthew 13:52

When I was invited to speak at this conference, I felt greatly honored -- as well as greatly humbled. I wondered what I, as just one among many, I could contribute that might enable the deep well of our spirituality to flow even more abundantly and to be shared more widely. I decided not to take a historical approach – which would have been more in line with my usual approach and my expertise. Instead, I went to the edges of my own journey, the edges of my expertise, and the edges of my small share of wisdom. In doing so, I believe that it is even more important to take seriously the chapter call to “be and act as one body.” You will hear many voices at this conference – voices from the podium, and voices in the halls and dining rooms and verandas. Each voice contributes something essential from that person’s exploration of their own spiritual frontiers. I invite you to listen to all the voices in that spirit: as members of a body discerning its way forward, listening to all its inner and outer voices, searching among them for the whisper of the Beloved Spirit who guides us together toward new frontiers of mission and growth.

When I say that we need to explore new sources for our spirituality of the heart, it is not because I see our spirituality as in any way fading away or losing its vitality at this time in history. On the contrary, everywhere that we find RSCJ sisters, associates, or others who share in Madeleine Sophie Barat’s charism, our spirituality glows and thrives with great attractiveness. Yet, our spirituality still remains in some sense one of the church’s “best kept secrets,” because it is really known almost exclusively through our own schools, ministries, and communities. In this time of profound crisis for the Earth and all its peoples, I believe we may be called to discover ways to articulate and to share our spirituality on a much broader basis. In order to do that, we will need to open ourselves to dialogue and exploration far beyond our traditional and customary sources.

This is not to suggest that we should abandon the old and traditional sources of our spirituality, such as all the classical Christian texts expounding devotion to the Sacred Heart and (of course) the writings of our own saints and wise women. Nonetheless, we can follow the example of contemporary spiritual teacher and Episcopalian priest Cynthia Bourgeault, who is seeking to renovate the Christian tradition of heart spirituality with both old and new sources.¹ In a lecture entitled “Radiant Intimacy of the Heart,” Bourgeault observes that the problem with modern traditions of Christian heart spirituality is that they have tended to focus on relatively superficial dimensions of the heart, such as visualized images or emotional feelings. Harking back to ancient Christian traditions of the desert fathers and mothers and of Eastern Orthodoxy, she searches for ways to reclaim the heart as a spiritual organ of luminous, radiant knowledge – knowledge that is, as she puts it, “impregnated by love.”² She is among those who assert that while the traditional sources of this Christian heart spirituality are definitely still valid, today we are blessed with access to a wide range of nontraditional sources that may be able to awaken and refresh this spirituality in surprising ways.

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Non-dual Christianity in Theory and Practice*, First Edition (Boulder: Shambhala, 2016).

² Cynthia Bourgeault, “Radiant Intimacy of the Heart” (October 20, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_bV8mxaXhE.

I will talk about these new sources for a spirituality of the heart under four main categories, while also loosely correlating each of them with one of the four calls of the 2016 General Chapter of the Society of the Sacred Heart. The first theme, exploration of the spiritual capacities of the physical heart, may be a dimension of “becoming more human.” The second, interfaith heart practices, “crosses new frontiers.” The third theme, the heart as an ecological organ for communication with other living creatures, may help us develop what it means to “become one body.” Finally, the heart as contact point with cosmic silence clearly “deepens silence.” Many of those who write and teach about spiritualities of the heart actually deal with several or all of these, but for the sake of presentation I will sort the authors according to which of these is most prominent in their approach.

Discovering the spiritual capacities of the physical heart

An important development of recent decades is burgeoning scientific research on the role of the *physical* heart in the emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of human life. This has led to the development of practices and techniques of heart-centeredness that can be taught completely outside of a religious context. Ongoing research suggests that these methods may enhance not only physical and mental health, but also compassion, interior resilience in the face of difficulties, well-discerned decision-making, conflict resolution, and social coherence – all of which are concerns that people like us often seek to address through our religious traditions and practices.³ I believe we have much to learn from this body-based approach. Perhaps we can think of this as an aspect of “becoming more human” in the sense of returning to what is most basic and common in our humanity. It may have the potential not only to enliven our spirituality of the heart in refreshing ways, but also to broaden the audiences to whom we can effectively communicate important elements of our tradition of the heart.

In the modern era, the physical heart has typically been understood simply in terms of its cardiovascular function of pumping blood throughout the body. A common assumption was that references to “heart” as a center of feeling or perception were basically metaphorical. In the 1960s, however, psychophysicists John and Beatrice Lacey developed a research program demonstrating that the heart independently initiates communication with other parts of the body, including the brain, thus having its own distinct influence on our perception and behavior.⁴ Subsequently some have proposed that we think of the heart as actually having its own “brain,” which described as “an intricate network of complex ganglia, neurotransmitters, proteins, and support cells, the same as those of the brain in the head.”⁵ Ongoing research continues to strengthen this picture of a body with at least two quite distinct centers (e.g. brain and heart) that process input and initiate action.⁶

³ For a popular discussion of these approaches, see: Joseph Chilton Pearce, *The Heart-Mind Matrix: How the Heart Can Teach the Mind New Ways to Think* (Rochester, Vt: Park Street Press, 2012).

⁴ For a review of John Lacey’s research, see: J. Richard Jennings and Michael G. H. Coles, “John I. Lacey,” in *Biographical Memoirs*, vol. 88 (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine), 228, accessed July 14, 2018, <https://www.nap.edu/read/11807/chapter/13>.

⁵ Rollin McCraty, *Science of the Heart: Exploring the Role of the Heart in Human Performance*, vol. 2 (Boulder Creek, CO: Heartmath, 2015), 5.

⁶ Or even three, as the gastrointestinal system has also been found to be girded with a vast network of neurons and to function in ways that strongly impact our mood and behavior. Adam Hadhazy, “Think Twice: How the Gut’s ‘second Brain’ Influences Mood and Well-Being,” *Scientific American*, February 12, 2010, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/gut-second-brain/>.

One group that has promoted this approach is the Heartmath Institute, which makes available a wide variety of online and face-to-face programs to teach people how to access the capabilities of the heart in order to live happier and more productive lives. The central Heartmath method is to teach people how to increase the coherence of their heartbeat, which in this context means an increased regularity in the patterns of one's heart rate variability. This has been found to correlate with increased feelings of peace, focus, and resilience.⁷ A second stage of training can increase synchronization among various systems such as heartbeat, breathing, and brain rhythms. Heartmath claims that as people learn to move into this coherent state more quickly, and to remain there longer, the depth of a flowing synchronization among all body systems increases and contributes to abilities such as to respond compassionately to oneself and others, to make decisions based on values rather than on emotional reactions, and to find joy in all that one encounters.

Like some other forms of meditation and alternative medicine that make big claims about their transformative potential, the Heartmath program has drawn some severe criticisms. The two main questions critics raise are, first, whether the scientific research supporting the practices is really valid and, second, whether the promoters may be more interested in generating income than in pursuing good research. One critic (a psychiatrist) called Heartmath claims "a mixture of good science, mediocre science taken out of context, and total bunk."⁸ So, I want to be clear that my intent in this paper is not to send everyone off to join the Heartmath program! What they offer is just one form of physical heart-centered meditation. Essentially, their method boils down to focusing on breathing rhythmically through the region of the physical heart, thus gradually learning to discover and maintain a state of calm well-being. Perhaps rather than going to Heartmath, we should be developing something like this ourselves as an introductory approach to heart spirituality that potentially can be shared broadly with people who would not be drawn to classical forms of Sacred Heart spirituality.

Another area of burgeoning research is the electromagnetic sensitivity and communication of the physical heart. Cardiologists began to detect the heart's biomagnetism in the 1960s, and currently medical research is developing highly sensitive instruments for measuring this radiation of the heart.⁹ The field of bioenergetics as an alternative healing modality (examples: acupuncture, qui-gong, reiki) is gaining some respectability, although scientific studies have given mixed results.¹⁰ Those who practice in this field assert that the

⁷ Sample studies include: S D. (Stephen David) Edwards and David John Edwards, "Contemplative Investigation into Christ Consciousness with Heart Prayer and HeartMath Practices," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 1–5; Paul Lehrer, "History of Heart Rate Variability Biofeedback Research: A Personal and Scientific Voyage.," *Biofeedback* 41, no. 3 (2013): 88–97; Kay Riley and Deanna Gibbs, "HeartMath in UK Healthcare: Does It Add Up?," *Journal of Holistic Healthcare* 10, no. 1 (2013): 23–28; Wobdy Bedell and Marietta Kaszkin-Bettag, "Coherence and Health Care Cost -- RCA Actuarial Study: A Cost-Effectiveness Cohort Study," *Alternative Therapies in Health & Medicine* 16, no. 4 (August 7, 2010): 26–31.

⁸ Scott Alexander, "Heartmath Considered Incoherent," *Slate Star Codex* (blog), July 17, 2014, <http://slatestarcodex.com/2014/07/17/heartmath-considered-incoherent/>.

⁹ D. Cohen, "Magnetic Fields around the Torso: Production by Electrical Activity of the Human Heart," *Science* 156 (1967): 652–54; Rainer Körber et al., "SQUIDS in Biomagnetism: A Roadmap towards Improved Healthcare.," *Superconductor Science & Technology* 29, no. 11 (November 2016): 1–1.

¹⁰ James L Oschman, *Energy Medicine: The Scientific Basis* (Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 2003); Jacqueline C. Wootton, "Energy Medicine: Information and Research Resources on the Web.," *Journal of Alternative & Complementary Medicine* 10, no. 1 (February 2004): 183–85; Wayne B. Jonas, "Magic and

physical heart not only continuously emits electrical and magnetic pulses, but also is exquisitely sensitive to incoming emanations. Thus, the heart receives vast amounts of information through this channel. Bioenergetics offers a physiological way of understanding subtle forms of communication between persons, as well as between people and other living things and between people and geophysical landscapes.

This heart “information” is, of course, totally nonverbal and nonanalytical; it comes in the form of feelings and intuitions that may remain subconscious unless translated into conscious thoughts by the brain. Yet we are always receiving and reacting to these forms of subtle electromagnetic communication, even when we are unaware of its existence. In other words, when we walk into a room we really are affected by the physical emanations coming from the hearts of those already present there.¹¹ “Heart to heart” communication, then, may not be not just a metaphor. Nor is it necessarily something strictly “mystical.” It appears to have a basis in the physical nature of our hearts as organs of electromagnetic communication and interpersonal synchronization. While this is only now beginning to be a topic for scientific research, it accords well with what has long been affirmed in traditions of heart spirituality – including our own!¹²

Interreligious and/or interspiritual Heart spirituality

Of course, the last thing we want to do as Religious of the Sacred Heart is to be reductionist, as if these new discoveries about the role of the physical heart explain everything one needs to know about heart spirituality. While focus on the physical provides us with a basis for articulating elements of heart spirituality that are common and available to all human beings, regardless of their background or beliefs, for us it is also necessary to go deeper and to open up the explicitly religious dimensions. A fascinating discovery is that almost every religious tradition has developed its own version of a “spirituality of the heart.” To explore some of these is certainly in line with our chapter call to “reach new frontiers”!

We live in a time when, in some places, interreligious frontiers are zones of intense conflict, distrust, and even violence. Yet it is also a time when, at least in the U.S. and other Western countries, a high percentage of the young (and not so young) find it perfectly natural to draw upon a variety of different religious traditions for spiritual sustenance, rather than to limit themselves to only one tradition. Could openness to exploring interreligious and/or interspiritual dimensions of the spirituality of the heart be a key frontier of mission within both of these contexts?

First to clarify the terminology here. “Interreligious” refers to an encounter in which adherents of each religion retain their distinctiveness, while being open to sharing some aspects of their lives. “Interspiritual” refers to the conviction that it is possible for a person or group to authentically belong to, and practice, more than one religion. To really live interspirituality as one’s spiritual path is far more difficult and demanding than the rather superficial eclectic approach which is common today. To cross religious frontiers with integrity normally requires first being well rooted in one’s original tradition as a home ground for dialogue and discernment. A great example in the Society of the Sacred Heart is the courageous path of Sisters Vandana

Methodology: When Paradigms Clash.,” *Journal of Alternative & Complementary Medicine*, August 1999, hch.

¹¹ S.M. Morris, “Facilitating Collective Coherence: Group Effects on Heart Rate Variability Coherence and Heart Rhythm Synchronization,” *Alternative Therapies in Health & Medicine* 16, no. 4 (2010): 62–72.

¹² Olga Louchakova, “Spiritual Heart and Direct Knowing in the Prayer of the Heart,” *Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis* 18, no. 1 (January 2007): 81–102.

Mataji and Ishpriya, who wholeheartedly practiced the way of life of the Hindu sannyasi while at the same time remaining Religious of the Sacred Heart. There are others among us, as well, who have delved deeply into traditions beyond the boundaries of Christianity. While full interspiritual immersion will always remain a special vocation, modified forms of interspiritual practice are becoming more and more common.

It would require a book, or perhaps an encyclopedia, to review all the elements of heart spirituality in world religions. The word “heart” is widely used in spiritual book titles of all traditions, with the general meaning of an inner center of affectivity, ethical choice, commitment, and fervor. Certain traditions, however, have developed more extended treatments of the spiritual role of the heart, as well as sophisticated practices for developing its capabilities. Despite the fact that these traditions do not necessarily agree on exactly what they mean by “heart,” it is surprising how many similarities can be observed in their actual practices. Here I have chosen only two examples, the first from Islam, which shares with Judaism and Christianity its roots in the Abrahamic tradition, and the second from Hinduism, which belongs to the broad grouping often termed “Eastern religions.”

The first example is the Islamic Sufi tradition, specifically the Mevlevi path of Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) as presented for contemporary seekers by Kabir Helminski. Cynthia Bourgeault suggests that the Sufis may have taken the framework of their heart spirituality from traditions of the Christian East, and then developed it in even greater depth.¹³ This tradition understands the human person as having a threefold structure consisting of ego-self (*nafs*), heart (*qalb*), and Spirit (*ruh*). The ego-self is a psychological structure focused on maintaining survival and pleasure. The heart, says Helminski, is “like a container made of the substance of presence.”¹⁴ It is the true core of our being and of our most authentic knowing. Finally, Spirit is “like a nondimensional point that is linked to the realm of Unity and has access to the realm of Attributes, the Divine Names.”¹⁵ The heart, poised between the other two realms, can be drawn in either direction, toward the ego-self or toward the Spirit. Sufi practices (*zikr*) are designed to reorient the heart from slavery to the ego-self toward a radical openness to Spirit. These practices work with the seven *latifas*, which are subtle, subconscious faculties through which one is able to know the deepest spiritual realities, far beyond what senses or intellect can access. Helminski describes work with the *latifas* as “carrying the light-energy of the spiritual practices of zikr to precise locations in the chest and head in order to energize and activate these faculties.”¹⁶ Summarizing these heart-practices, he concludes: “The heart is the throne of the All-Merciful Spirit; when the heart is pure, it is guided directly by God.”¹⁷

My second example is the teaching of Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), an Advaita Vedanta yogi who continues to inspire many devotees throughout the world. One of the groups propagating his teachings has chosen the Sanskrit word *Hridaya* to define its type of yoga, basing this on a statement Ramana made as he pointed to a disciple’s chest: “Here lies the Heart, the dynamic, Spiritual Heart. It is called *Hridaya* and is located on the right side of the chest and is clearly visible to the inner eye of an adept on the Spiritual Path. Through meditation

¹³ Bourgeault, “Radiant Intimacy of the Heart.”

¹⁴ Kabir Edmund Helminski, *The Knowing Heart: A Sufi Path of Transformation* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 63.

¹⁵ Helminski, 64.

¹⁶ Helminski, 80.

¹⁷ Helminski, 83.

you can learn to find the Self [*atman*] in the cave of this Heart.”¹⁸ The Hridaya Yoga website emphasizes that this “Spiritual Heart” is not the physical heart, nor is it what is known as the heart chakra, which they define as a subtle but still physical manifestation. Rather, “Hridaya, the Spiritual Heart is not just a spark of God; the Spiritual Heart is God.”¹⁹ This affirmation is based in the fundamental Advaita Vedanta teaching that Atman (the Self) is Brahman (God). On the face of it at least, this theology differs substantially from Christian understandings of heart, self, and God. Yet the recommended practices and the fruits that are claimed to flow from them display considerable convergences with those of the Sufis and also, as one part of the Hridaya Yoga website explains in some detail, with those of the Christian desert abbas and ammas.²⁰

Obviously, I’ve barely scratched the surface of this topic. All I am able to do here is to point toward this frontier and its potential – as well as its challenges and risks.

The heart as an organ of ecological communication

In this era of massive ecological devastation, there may be no more important mission than helping humanity to re-learn how to live sensitively and responsibly as participant-members of our local and global communities of living beings. Emerging from millions of years of hominid evolution, our species (*Homo sapiens*) spent its first 100,000 years or more surviving only by having intimate knowledge and sensitivity to its natural environment. While we should not romanticize that period which was also a time when humans propagated much violence and suffered myriad varieties of misery, the current crisis of the Earth cries out for us to reclaim some of those lost skills of sensitivity and participative consciousness that are part of our evolutionary heritage.²¹ Our chapter call “to be and to act as a single body” focuses primarily on ourselves as a congregation, but I would suggest that an even more profound frontier may be the rediscovery that we are one body with the whole Earth and its community of life.²²

One of the major proponents of recovering these intuitive skills as a form of “heart knowledge” is the herbal medicine expert Stephen Harrod Buhner. His book entitled *The Secret Teaching of Plants* has the subtitle, “The Intelligence of the Heart in the Direct Perception of Nature.”²³ The first half of this book is an overview of how the natural world communicates through subtle vibratory patterns and how the human heart receives this communication at physical, emotional, and spiritual levels. He references the scientific basis for this in studies of electromagnetic communication, which I mentioned in an earlier section of this talk. Much oversimplified, the gist of Buhner’s message is that if we learn how to listen with the heart to the living things that we encounter, they will eagerly offer us healing in all dimensions of our being.

I find Buhner’s work attractive because it offers a way of understanding some unusual experiences that I have had. Just to give one example: One summer I spent two to three hours

¹⁸ Mercedes de Acosta, *Here Lies the Heart* (NY: Reynal & Company, 1960), 294, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015008391198;view=1up;seq=326>.

¹⁹ “What Is Hridaya, the Spiritual Heart?,” Hridaya Yoga, accessed April 16, 2018, <https://hridaya-yoga.com/hridaya-yoga-articles/what-is-hridaya-the-spiritual-heart/>.

²⁰ “What Is Hridaya, the Spiritual Heart?”

²¹ See, for example, Christopher Uhl, *Developing Ecological Consciousness: The End of Separation*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

²² See Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home: Laudato Si’* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015), #89.

²³ Stephen Harrod Buhner, *The Secret Teachings of Plants: The Intelligence of the Heart in the Direct Perception of Nature* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2004).

each day working in a particular section of a forest, clearing brush and vines around a hiking trail. One hot, sticky day when the labor had been particularly heavy, I paused for a moment's respite. As I stood gazing out into the forest, I suddenly had the distinct awareness that the forest was shyly "talking" to me – not in words, but in sensations of the heart. It was a poignant moment, as if a very shy but tender beast was reaching out to make friends. I felt, emotionally and spiritually, the longing of the Earth to repair the broken heart-bond with us rampaging humans.

Even having had such experiences myself, at times my academically-trained mind jumps back in shock at the "weirdness" of some of what Buhner describes as common in this world of ecological heart-perception.²⁴ It reminded me somewhat of the books of Carlos Castaneda, which years ago engendered a similar mix of fascination and disbelief with their accounts of shamanistic adventures.²⁵ Castaneda was later discredited as a deceiver who apparently never did the anthropological research that he claimed as basis for his stories. Major differences between Buhner and Castaneda, however, are that Buhner grounds his approach in what science has learned about the heart, as well as in decades of his own experimentation and learning from traditional and modern herbal medicine practitioners. Also, he provides step by step instructions for a variety of practices designed to develop one's capacities for heart perception and communication. One does not have to become a "devotee" who accepts this worldview on faith, but rather a practitioner who experiments and discovers what is of value for oneself.

In one chapter Buhner discusses in considerable detail how to become intimate with a plant, describing the encounter in terms very similar to those one might use for the budding of an exciting and intense friendship. His characterization of such a relationship also has much in common with a spiritual discipline, requiring concentration, commitment, the careful cultivation of memory, and a rhythmic oscillation between deep engagement and letting go. These practices can flourish in an experience of two lives (yours and the plant's) vibrantly interwoven. At the center of this interweaving, Buhner asserts, "the earnest desire of your deep self to know" engenders "bursts of understanding" that convey the healing meaning and power of the plant.²⁶ This reception of meaning is primarily the work of the heart, with the brain as its assistant to supply words and images as needed.

To follow Buhner's method of heart-perception fully, it seems, would lead us into an entirely different perception of the world. From the point of view of our ordinary perception, which has been trained to favor the analytic and linguistic approach of the brain, this world of the ecological heart seems to shimmer with a kind of subterranean, dream-like radiance. It is a world in which intimate communication with animals, plants, and physical places -- like my experience of the forest reaching out with tender longing for my friendship – becomes the norm rather than the exception. It is a world in which one traces one's way slowly by following the hints offered by feelings, moods, intuitions, and subconsciously generated images. This world is more like that of the shaman, the visionary, or the poet than like that of the sensible modern businessperson or academician. Practicality will probably argue that we cannot operate all the time on the basis of this kind of approach to the world around us. Yet, on the other hand, the

²⁴ See, for example, Stephen Harrod Buhner, *Plant Intelligence and the Imaginal Realm: Beyond the Doors of Perception into the Dreaming Earth* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2014).

²⁵ Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2008).

²⁶ Buhner, *The Secret Teachings of Plants*, 169.

burgeoning crisis of the Earth will remind us of the urgency of rediscovering this capacity of the heart to guide us in rediscovering how to be full participants in the community of all living beings.

The heart as center of silence

While Buhner focuses on developing the heart's capacity for ecological perception and interaction, Robert Sardello develops the theme of the heart as center of contact with primordial Silence. This obviously aligns closely with our explicit chapter call to deepen in contemplative silence. Silence, as Sardello presents it, is far more than the absence of sound. Rather, it is a contemplative realm of profound presence that permeates and surrounds all things. Sardello's approach to Silence is thoroughly incarnational. The whole body, from most peripheral to most interior, is touched by the presence of Silence. It is the heart, however, which has the capacity to center and radiate this awareness. Thus, to be in touch with this resonant realm is to live, as he calls it, "heartfully."²⁷

Contact with the realm of Silence, says Sardello, is most typically felt as a profound sense of warmth and intimacy that is experienced bodily as well as to the depths of the soul. He writes:

As we enter the mystery of Silence, its presence resonates through the fibers of our flesh, while extending beyond the flesh to the soul inwardly and the cosmos outwardly. Our body's center is the necessary meeting point where the inward silence of solitude meets up with the great Silence of Cosmic Wisdom. . . . [Silence] goes to the deepest depths of our soul and to the outermost reaches of the cosmos and continually unites the two at the centering place of our heart. Here we discover the power of re-creation. Here everything comes alive again as if for the first time.²⁸

Primordial Silence, says Sardello, is our "ever faithful companion-presence"²⁹ that catalyzes our potential for intensity, wholeness, and integrity. Even though this primordial Silence actually permeates and surrounds us at all times, our awareness of it inevitably ebbs and flows. Thus fidelity to the path of Silence is a lifelong adventure of ever-renewed discovery. With committed cultivation of our heart-capacity to be aware of Silence, we may gradually discover how to reach out for its healing touch even in the midst of the activity and noise that permeate our daily lives.

Fortunately, Sardello is a master teacher who does not just describe eloquently, but also leads us in discovering the path to this profound experience. His book *Heartfulness* presents a lengthy series of exercises designed to lead the practitioner step by step into the inner world of resonant Silence.³⁰ I must say that I have never before encountered a book quite like this one. I found each page utterly fascinating, yet could rarely read more than one or two pages a day, because I felt so deeply drawn into the inner adventure of this world of Silence. The recommended exercises begin with two that Sardello regards as foundational: first a "Heart Alignment" that awakens heartfulness in the inner body centers of the brow, throat, heart, and solar plexus, and then a "Silence" exercise that awakens awareness of Silence as literally

²⁷ Robert Sardello, *Heartfulness* (Gainesville, TX: Goldenstone Press, 2015).

²⁸ Robert J. Sardello, *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2008), 8.

²⁹ Sardello, 7.

³⁰ Sardello, *Heartfulness*.

embracing and permeating body and soul. These exercises are to be repeated each day, while gradually adding others to enter ever more deeply into heartfelt living.

Another master teacher who in many ways brings all the themes of this paper together is the Indian Jesuit Sebastian Painadath. Drawing deeply on Hindu Yoga traditions as well as his own Catholic faith, his book *The Power of Silence* presents fifty meditations that begin by teaching us how to breathe our way into deep awareness of our living reciprocity with our Mother the Earth. His description of the power of silence is similar to that of Sardello. He writes: “Meditative silence is not just abstaining from speech or overcoming distractions but an intense experience of bodily silence. One experiences the power of silence permeating the whole body.”³¹ Connecting this to his own Ignatian tradition of discernment, he notes that only in this permeating silence is it possible to discern where the presence of the Spirit is leading a person.³²

For Painadath, the great challenge for Christian spiritual seekers is to make the transition from a strictly interpersonal or devotional (Sanskrit, *bhakti*) relationship with Christ, to a transpersonal or mystical (*jnana*) experience of mutual inner presence. Interpersonal devotion is by no means rejected, but we must discover that it only really will reach its fulfillment through “total inner self-surrender” that opens up to an entirely different level of contemplative presence.³³ That is, I think, a great way to sum up the ultimate contemplative challenge of our own Sacred Heart spirituality – both for ourselves, and for those with whom we may be called to share it.

Conclusion

The common theme of all four of the new sources that I have explored is a very concrete, deeply grounded practice of heart-sensitivity. These practices are all founded on the conviction that the heart is an actual organ of a level of spiritual perception that has largely been lost, even in our traditional religious practices. Speaking for myself, exploring these practices has indeed opened up significant new dimensions of the interior life for me. You may recall that at the beginning of the talk I referred to Cynthia Bourgeault’s understanding of the heart as a center of radiant intimacy and luminous knowledge “impregnated by love.” I suspect that many of us can identify with that experience of the heart. What these practices offer is fresh approaches to cultivating that level of our interior lives in a more intensive, ongoing, systematic way than we may have been accustomed to. I should also note that while these practices most directly focus on deepening the contemplative dimension of our “wholly contemplative, wholly apostolic” spirituality, I am convinced that they also could have profound implications for the apostolic aspect of our life. This is a topic I had hoped to address more fully, but due to time limitations it must be left for another occasion!

As is no doubt already evident, one of the main reasons I have termed these four “new sources” is that (except for Painadath) they do not derive from the Christian tradition. Some of the authors speak of Jesus with great respect, while others do not mention him at all. As we explore such nontraditional sources, we will always discern their value and appropriateness for us by staying in touch with our own roots. Gustavo Gutierrez was wise when he entitled his

³¹ Sebastian Painadath, *The Power of Silence: Fifty Meditations to Discover the Divine Space within You* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2009), 26.

³² Painadath, 13.

³³ Painadath, 106.

premier book, “We drink from our own wells.”³⁴ For us, for sure, the deep well of our spirituality of the heart always must fundamentally draw its living water from the open and pierced Heart of Jesus. As I studied these “new sources” I sometimes found theological affirmations that I could not accept side by side with insights and practices that I found astonishingly helpful for my own growth as a Christian. We need to open the door and let the fresh wind of the Spirit blow through, at the same time that we maintain discerning alertness so that we stay firmly rooted in our central commitment to the personal Heart of Christ.

Again, let me emphasize that the problem I am concerned with is not that our spirituality is dying; the problem is that the forms in which it has been articulated and taught in the past may not be the best for communicating it broadly to a younger, more diverse, and less traditionally formed population. We must be bold in our willingness to test the boundaries of new approaches while also taking care to remain faithful to the core of our own tradition. This is what it means, I believe, to follow Philippine in her courageous willingness to broach new frontiers!

Questions for Reflection

- 1) Are you aware of other non-traditional sources for spiritualities of the heart that we could also benefit from exploring?
- 2) What would you identify as key criteria of discernment for whether a non-traditional source is truly compatible with our spirituality of the pierced Heart of Jesus?

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