

EXPLORATIONS



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The Still Point and Modern Science

**Suzanne Farnham
Founder**

Scripture conveys God as both the center and the circumference, the source that is within yet encompasses all that is. Modern science, particularly in physics, has developed concepts consistent with this spiritual reality.

Back in 1931, Monsignor Georges Lamaitre, a Belgian physicist and Roman Catholic priest, postulated that at some time in the far distant past the entire mass of the universe was concentrated into one SINGLE POINT that was the beginning of time and space. This marked the conception of what came to be known as the Big Bang theory, which points to the beginning of creation. In more recent years, evidence observed by astrophysicists has been rapidly validating this theory.

More than seventy years ago, the Anglican poet T. S. Eliot perceived something akin to this when he wrote *Four Quartets*, in which he spoke of the “still point at the center of the turning world,” a point at which “there is neither movement nor arrest,” a point of no motion, from which proceeds the dance and without which there is no dance.

Creation is complex and integrated, held together by principles of profound compassion and truth, reflecting a source that is intelligent beyond human comprehension. Science is verifying much of what people in touch with God at their center have known for centuries.

Contemporary astrophysics has aspects consonant with mystical spirituality. For me, it strongly reinforces my deeply held faith, reminding me of words written by St. Ambrose in the fourth century:

O God, creation's secret force,
Thyself unmoved, all motion's source,
Who from the morn till evening ray
Through all its changes guid'st the day.

Practicing God's Presence

Joe Gill
Severna Park, MD

Tuesday, January 6 was my last day at work at the Department of Natural Resources. So what did I do on Wednesday, my first day of not working, not having a job in sight? Here is an email I wrote to my wife, Patty, at 3:30 in the afternoon. It's titled "Journal of a House Husband – Day 1":

- Got up late.
- Checked work email. Realized I was unemployed.
- Met with Pastor. She needs help with a project during the day and said, "everyone works." Salt in the wound. I volunteered.
- Went to Kohl's, returned bras. (Okay, they were not mine. But it would be okay if they were.)
- Went to Safeway, picked up blood pressure medicine.
- Planned mancation at Myrtle Beach.
- Made wife's lunch.
- Folded laundry.
- Waiting until 5:00 for first glass of wine.
- What a day.

This brings me to Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was born circa 1614. He lived the last part of his life in a Carmelite monastery in Paris. In a monastery there are set times for prayer: *Lauds* in the morning, *Vespers* and *Compline* in the evening, other times of prayer during the day. For Brother Lawrence, though, the set times for prayer "were not different from other times." He had formed, he said, a "habit of conversing with God continually" and of referring all that he did to God. For him, this meant acting toward God "with the greatest simplicity, speaking to Him frankly and plainly, and imploring His assistance in our affairs, just as they happen."

I had just finished reading *The Practice of the Presence of God: Conversations and Letters of Brother Lawrence*. There were two things that appealed to me about Brother Lawrence's life at the monastery. First, he was in charge of purchasing wine for the monastery. What's not to like about French wine? Second, he was a cook, as am I, at least in my house. And yet, Brother Lawrence liked neither of these tasks. He had, as he said, "no turn for business," and he was lame, which made it hard to get around the boat that carried the casks of wine. But, it was God's business he was doing, so he performed it well. Likewise, he had a "great aversion" to the business in the kitchen. Yet, though he worked in the greatest hurry with staff and stove, he had, said those who watched him, a calm devotion and composure about it all. Said Brother Lawrence, "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees" at the altar on Sunday. Whether in the kitchen, while purchasing wine, or at set times of daily prayer, Brother Lawrence was practicing the presence of God.

Achieving a habit of practicing the presence of God had not been easy. As with any new habit, it had caused Brother Lawrence, as he said, "no small pain." To "form a habit of conversing with God continually, and referring all we do to Him, we must first apply to Him with some diligence," he said. We must empty our heart of all other things, because "God will possess the heart alone." If we form this habit, if we empty our heart for God, we will have a sense of God present in all that we do. We will realize the instruction of St. Paul to "pray unceasingly."

I would like to be able to say that, as I stood at the return counter at Kohl's holding two bras that had traveled two thousands miles to Korea but did not fit my daughter Mallory, I had a sense of the presence of God. No, no, I did not . . . and yet – and yet – I want to believe that the presence of God was already there – as His presence is in all that we do. Brother Lawrence said of his praying that it "was nothing else but a sense of the presence of God." I think of him in the kitchen or buying wine, not distinguishing his time of business from his time of prayer, living in the present, conversing with God. Are those actions any different from going to Kohl's? I think of my mother, in the year before she died. I had asked her, "Do you think about God?" and she had responded, with a warm smile, "I think about Him all the time." I remember a teacher of mine, John Dunne, who in his last book wrote of "letting our ongoing conversation with ourselves become a conversation with God," of turning over our hopes and fears to God. All of us are engaged in thinking during the day. What are we going to do now or later? Are we going to the grocery store, making the next meal, doing the wash? Have the children done their homework? What time are the Redskins playing? All of us have to one degree or another an ongoing conversation with ourselves: our plans, our hopes, our fears, our worries. Some of us, as we get older, even talk aloud to ourselves. If we let this ongoing conversation become a conversation with God, if we give each day to God just as it happens, we will live in the present and be practicing the presence of God, wherever we go and in whatever we do.

Joe Gill, trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries, is a co-author of Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community and a leader of the Day of Discernment program.

Spiritual Conflict Resolution

On occasion, a controversy arises that causes a deep divide within a congregation, a denomination, or a church-related institution. Such a crisis can be an opportunity for members of a community of faith to grow into a deeper relationship with God and one another. Listening Hearts has a retreat for spiritual conflict resolution called "Opening the Ear of Your Heart" that sets a path toward healing and reconciliation through imaginative engagement with Scripture, prayerful listening, and contemplative sharing of thoughts of the heart. Here are some comments offered by program participants:

"The intentional silence allowed time to listen to both others and the spirit, and space for openness to speak."

"I was aware of each person's heart, or being, connected with mine."

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MISSION STATEMENT

Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.

By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, when in fact we live steeped in its burning layers.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

“I very much experienced the group as the body of Christ present in this place.”

“Contemplation exercises and time to interact were most helpful. I loved the music and the meaningful words. I didn’t feel pushed or prodded but allowed to progress at my own pace.”

“The mobile with the barbed wire [that was created during a meditation exercise] touched my heart.”

“We grew into a real, living, authentic body of Christ.”

If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:17-18