

Reflections on Spirituality for Mercy Educators for Our Times
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This summer, I was drawn to take a mystical text called *Contemplate the Gentleness of God*, with me on retreat. This is a series of retreat conferences by Claire Dumont, based on Louis-Marie de Montfort's *The Love of Eternal Wisdom*. De Montfort (1673- 1716) reflects on the "Wisdom" of God, Jesus as Incarnate Wisdom, drawing on the Book of Wisdom in the Scriptures. It is a Trinitarian Mysticism expressing the interior life of the Trinity that flows out to us and encompasses us, drawing us into this loving embrace of God.

The Father is totally in the Son as the Son is totally in the Father; the Spirit is totally in the Father and the Son, and this without ever losing their identity. Each person has her own specific role to play but cooperates in the action of the one and the other with respect and gentleness. There cannot be violence, because all activity of the Father is done in gentleness and it is so of the Son. And the Spirit, the energy that binds them is only tenderness.

No one can ever imagine the life of relationship of I Am, Three in One. ...The love that is lived in the Three is an immense and powerful fire always irrupting, that impels God to leave Godself to create. What spreads from this relationship then is only gentleness because God gives only what God is. So is found in the Trinity the inexhaustible source between the Three cannot be otherwise, because they are One whose name is I Am, whose logic is love. "We are invited to aspire to live this "being in the other. ... Thus we live in God and God in us"¹

¹ Claire Dumont, *Contemplate the Gentleness of God*, Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2017, 96-97.

The Merciful Trinity- Caritas Mueller, OP



Prominent in the text, illustrating this tender and gentle Trinitarian God is this photograph of a ceramic sculpture entitled, “The Merciful Trinity” created by a Dominican Sister, Caritas Muller. This image captured the themes of this mystical text very powerfully. I invite you to contemplate this image for a few moments. Don’t just look at it. Place yourself somewhere within the embrace of the Trinitarian persons represented in the sculpture. As you enter this embrace of a gentle and compassionate God, where do you find yourself? What is your embodied response to this enveloping tenderness? What associations do you have to it? What feelings and responses are evoked?

[table conversation]

This may seem to some of you an odd way to begin my reflections with you and a huge leap from your presentation on technology. I had been feeling “beat up” all year with the increasing violence in our country, so much meanness, so much hostile and disrespectful speech, so many incidents of gun violence, so many reports of racialized police brutality, so much unraveling of our social fabric, so much callous disregard for our suffering planet and so many people fleeing environmental disasters and violence. Those of us who are educators within the Mercy tradition, recognize the wisdom of the Sisters’ Chapter in 2017, which called us to approach all our critical concerns through the lens of non-violence. Likewise, it pointed us to respond to some other aspects of our culture which disrupt or interrupt our capacity for empathy, connection, care, and robustly live in the Divine Presence who is continually moving toward us in gentleness and compassion, enabling us to respond in our ministry of education to our students, families, and suffering communities.

In my time with you, I would like to explore some facets of Christian spirituality – both the patently mystical—those many times when we experience ourselves held in God’s love even in very difficult circumstances as well as reflect on the need to cultivate in ourselves and in our school communities specific practices which help us cultivate the best in us-- behaviors and attitudes and resist the worst and foster the best so that we become ever more available to this gentle and merciful God’s purposes in our personal lives and in our collective ministries.

Within Christianity, our most fundamental religious experience is that of a self-revealing, self-gifting God who embraces us and invites us into relationship with Godself. Interestingly, some neuroscience studies acknowledge that it is characteristic of us as humans that we are

made, or have evolved over millennia, so that we can ‘perceive’ and ‘experience’ God rather than ‘believe in and produce God.” Religious belief and experience of God are not fictions of our imagination or merely creations of our neurological circuits. Rather, our human consciousness itself enables us to reflect on the mystery of our very being and for that matter, the being of anything at all. We are made with an inborn capacity to both perceive and experience that mystery which we name God.

This capacity for introspection and self-awareness can lead us to experiences of ‘bliss,’ either experiences of our own self-transcendence or explicit experiences of God/Jesus/Spirit for which religious traditions give us language, support, exemplars, and texts that offer guidance and inspiration..

Even without a religious tradition, experiences of mystery and divinity are mediated through the sacramentality of the natural world. Creation itself is God’s first revelation and manifests intimations of divinity across all major religions.

Nature in its benevolent forms nurtures us, evokes us, inspires wonder and awe. “Green” and “Blue” places have been shown to be particularly beneficial to our sense of well-being. And they tend to bring us home to ourselves as well, to our interior ruminations, awareness of feelings and offer a spaciousness in which our consciousness delights. Some are drawn out of ourselves to the beauty, mystery, or even attentive noticing of intricate details of a tree or bird, or plant. Others are drawn to an inward place, where supported by the natural surroundings, we are calmed into introspective reverie, to be delighted, surprised, amused, or even challenged by the thoughts and feelings that arise. Our responses can span the gamut from peaceful contentment, a sense of wholeness, delight in beauty, as well as just feeling more whole, connected, and coherent within ourselves. These experiences can be a deep sense of God’s presence to us, the

natural setting its own sacred place of communion with the Divine, and we can also be drawn as well to grief over the ecological destruction of places like these. The devastation we witness all over the country from floods and wild-fires, to volcanic eruptions that threaten the lives and homes of those who live in these places evoke in us lament over harm to so many life forms as well as awaken our conscience to intensify our efforts to care for the creation itself and mitigate the toll we humans are taking on our environment.

This explicit awareness of and response to the sacred and the Divine Presence occurs in unique ways for each person. For some, spiritual awakening occurs at a very young age, for others it can manifest at any time in one's life-cycle in a personal and experiential way, often at a transition point within the life-cycle. In many years of mentoring spiritual directors, each director-in-training could clearly identify when this awareness of the presence of God became available and evoked an explicit response. Even some small children awaken to these touches of God's loving presence, while others become conscious at various points in the life-cycle, often during a transition from one stage of development to another. As we mature, and interpretations of these experiences become more complex, our responses become more explicit. For others, experiences in nature are simply experiences of solitude, a being with oneself, reflecting on whatever is going on inside of us. These are also fruitful experiences which offer space to sort things and reflect on life. [Take another moment to reflect on your own spiritual history. When did you first experience God—a time when you felt close to God/Jesus, companioned by divinity, in conversation with God, sensing the presence of God.] Evelyn Underhill called such experiences a "spiritual awakening." And she marked this awareness as the beginning of the mystical life. Our responses to it vary. Recall both an emergence of personal experience of God

in your life and your response to it. What might be your personal touch-stones for life lived under the on-going sway of God in your life?

As one responds to these experiences and learns to live in the presence of God, spiritual life stabilizes gradually to what Ignatius named, “finding God in all things.” Or Tilden Edwards talks about it as “Living in the Presence.” This flow between self and God becomes habitual and steady, guiding one’s ministry, relationships and life from within this circle of grace. These moments and awarenesses arrive as “given” rather than something we make happen. Yet each chooses to respond or not in an on-going way. We are fortunate if we belong to a faith community which helps us name these experiences, find companions on this journey, and provides guides, exemplars, and texts that can guide us and inspire us on this journey.

There are many definitions for spirituality. One I think is helpful is Canadian David Perrin’s describing spirituality as being inherent within human persons regardless of whether they are also explicitly religious. He says:

Spirituality stands at the junction where the deepest concerns of humanity, and the belief in transcendental values, come together in the movement toward ultimate fulfillment in life. The spiritual center is the deepest center of the person: the place of surrender to authenticity and love. It is here that human beings are open to the transcendent, whatever that is for the individual. It is here that human beings experience ultimate reality and their most profound desires are satisfied.²

² David Perrin, OMI, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, New York: Routledge, 2007, 22.

Spirituality also expresses the most significant values of human life. Those values are cultivated by and expressed in practices—ways of acting, believing, feeling, thinking, and choosing. Consciously or not, each person constructs a spirituality that embodies the purpose and meaning of his or her life from available options in a spiritual or cultural tradition. Once spiritual awakening occurs, most benefit from guidance in the ways of responding and deepening one's capacity to live from this deeper place of connection with the Holy One. When God arrives in an unexpected way, awe and fear can result in a person shutting it down and avoiding further encounters by closing themselves off, avoiding prayer, or whatever the mediating occasion of such grace was. Educators, campus ministers, and robust programs both in the classroom and beyond can help normalize and encourage this tentative opening to the Sacred.

It is important to recognize that drawing from a deep and varied tradition offers many resources and insights not available when spirituality is reduced to a privatized, individual approach to spiritual life. For many Catholics, some of their experiences of God take place within the Eucharist and the practices surrounding it such as Praise and Worship ending in Benediction., Taize prayer around the Cross, and the carefully choreographed Chairis retreat in many secondary schools, and on some campuses Scripture-sharing groups. We understand ourselves to be part of the great communion of saints who have gone before us and who accompany us in the present as each person moves forward on one's personal spiritual journey in the presence of some others. This way, we can learn from those who have gone before us as well as our near companions the significance of such transcendent experiences and the availability of a host of practices—ways of acting, believing, feeling, thinking, and choosing.

If we have become spiritually aware, we flourish when we find companionship and support in our spiritual journeys at whatever age. This is a life-long process. It is important for educators and campus ministers to acknowledge and support this communal context for growth in the spiritual life as well as the more individualized or solitary experiences of grace. All of us need some kind of social support, over time to grow and mature in the spiritual life. It is important to think about what those contexts are today. I am continually surprised at how poorly educated in their faith our Catholic undergrads are. Here I am referring to those who regularly participate in the Catholic chapel community of worship and small Christian communities. Their faith development typically does not match their development in other subject areas of study. They do seek out the chaplains (ordained and non-ordained). And they regularly attend liturgy, but they don't have a bigger Catholic picture. Our very gifted head chaplain would take the congregation through a guided meditation in a homily. Or he would give an eloquent but greatly simplified description of a key church teaching related to a scripture text or some current event. It always took me by surprise how elementary his teaching was, but I also recognized he knew where the students were.

Spirituality is also a meaning-making process. Frequently, this meaning-making happens in the form of a narrative description, which creates some temporal sequencing and a description of what happened. The opportunity to share an experience, issue, existential challenge to another or in a group leads to deeper understanding and appropriation of the experience as well as fruitful connection with others. In the telling, meanings change and evolve over time. Some preoccupations become more central and others fade or even disappear. Sharing on this level

opens new possibilities for other participants. Such narrative reflections on existential experiences beyond explicitly religious ones enable us to articulate what gives our lives meaning and to become this kind of persons over time. What kind of person do I want to become? What contribution can I make to the human community? Given my gifts and interests, where might I serve others either in a church context, in education, health care, social justice work, public service, health, social work, justice work, or something else, as well as family life. Spirituality also relates to meaning-making and character. Who am I becoming? What are my gifts? In which context do I offer them? How does this context support my desires and deepen my commitment and how might it become a place of suffering and diminishment when it hinders my ability toward positive action in the world? And how might this social location and the networks in which I participate strengthen and support me as well as challenge me to become the best I can be? These themes come up in career counseling, mentoring programs, and through the successful graduates of our schools whose lives offer testimony to all kinds of good work in the world.

These kinds of reflections become ever more important when it can not be presumed that young people today or even ourselves will remain in one or another specific religious tradition over our life-times. And even if we do, how we continue to live within, and flourish in a particular faith community may change rather dramatically over time.

As Americans, we are somewhat presupposed to think in individualistic ways and neglect the role of social groups from families to communities, clubs, or networks to larger movements. Yet it remains important to understand the wisdom traditions that presume we are at our best humanly and spiritually, when we are connected to one another in significant ways through

shared forms of meaning-making and ritual practices. These shared forms of meaning making for us as Catholics are the Scriptures, the tradition of saints as exemplars, social justice teachings, ethics and our many traditions of spirituality and worship. It is important to connect our personal and intimate experiences of the Holy with the communion of saints, both our companions in faith in the present and those who have already gone before us, which can inspire and support us throughout our entire lives. It is important to recognize that spiritual life is not mine alone, but mine in a community of others who claim this belonging throughout history, in the present, and into the future.

It matters whether we practice spirituality within a larger, coherent, theological, spiritual, religious, or philosophical world-view that informs our practices and helps us interpret their results or conversely, we simply engage in practicing spirituality apart from any specific religious or philosophical perspective. It is tempting for many to identify as being spiritual but not religious today. There are innumerable opportunities for spiritual development and growth in the spirituality marketplace. But without practicing a religion or embracing some version of the system of belief and experience in which a spiritual practice is rooted, a great deal of the wisdom and guidance is simply lost, and many of the understandings of a practice embedded in a larger, more complex teaching, simply disappears. There is a great deal of contemporary research time indicating that spirituality has great benefits for secondary school students on all measures of health and psychological well-being in addition to spiritual ones.

Spiritual Practices and Exercises

In this context, practicing spirituality can mean many things. Process theologian, Francis Baur describes “the spiritual person is one who is interested in and dedicated to the artful handling of the world, the artful shaping of one’s own self, and the artful forming of one’s life into something beautiful.”³ This definition is influenced by process theology and art. Karl Rahner said, “The spiritual life is grace precisely because it must be painstakingly cultivated day by day... It is also work, planned exercise and conscious development of the believing, hoping, and loving life....”⁴ Theologian and therapist, Kathleen Fischer described the marks of “A New Asceticism” in this ecological age as these: 1- An ecological spirituality roots asceticism in love of the body and creation, thus correcting an association of asceticism as body-denying. 2- Christian asceticism readies us for transfiguration by the Spirit. 3-Ascetic practices are not ends in themselves, but a means to embody the reign of God and to free us for love and work. 4- Community provides balance and support for asceticism and for personal and communal growth. 5-And finally, both renunciation and celebration characterize the rhythm of Christian existence.⁵ All of these theologically informed descriptions of spiritual practices place them within ever new contexts—an evolving universe and the suaveness of love, love of God and love of neighbor as requiring conscious effort, and new insights about our relationship to our bodies and ecological challenges.

Historical theologian Margaret Miles says that spiritual practices support life-enhancing goals and help us to recognize and work against or resist that which is harmful to us. Self-Enhancing Goals might include: practices that lead to greater self-understanding, or to exploring

³ Francis Baur, *Life in Abundance*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1983, 256.

⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*, New York: Crossroad, 1984. “Asceticism,” 236.

⁵ Kathleen Fischer, *Loving Creation: Christian Spirituality, Earth-Centered and Just*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2009, 136-151.

the edges of the psyche or of consciousness. These include spiritual direction, journaling, dream work, meditation, solitude silence, therapy, etc. These types of practices work against unconscious patterns of attraction or repulsion. She names other practices that help us control the addictive and deadening agendas of sex, power, and possessions which religious vows target, but which are inherent in every life-style. These practices work against cultural conditioning, apparent needs, attachments, and limits. She describes other practices as gathering and focusing energy away from excessive care of the body or away from its neglect. These kinds of processes work against distraction, entertainment, cultural conditioning, and dissipation of energy. We might add today, the addictive nature of our technological devices. And finally, Miles advocates life-enhancing goals that include intensification and concentration of consciousness enabling one to become freer for love and work and to resist a focus that is not on God, the values we espouse, and focus instead on our own central commitments. These might include personal and communal prayer, worship, cultivation of virtues, and sacramental life.⁶

Today, we live in a culture of “systemic distraction,” and many of us who are not digital natives have developed an addiction to our all-pervasive technologies, especially smart phones. With settings that announce the arrival of messages, posts, and emails, many report checking their phones every ten minutes or oftener. This constant series of notifications disrupt concentration, reinforce mind wandering instead, and the over reliance on digital communication now results for many in losing the ability to converse with one another and relate to the persons

⁶ Margaret Miles, “Four Types of Christian Asceticism” in *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations of a New Asceticism*, 1981, 135-154.

actually in our presence.⁷ Relationship to one's body has become less negative and destructive and shifted to a healthier and more holistic relationship. But ever new addictive substances remain significant in the life of many, and especially among teens just discovering them..

These critical approaches to spiritual practices offer new ways of understanding traditional ascetical practices, both their corrective elements as well as the way they foster a deeper and on-going relationship with God as well as life in community. This new asceticism includes healthier bodily habits, ways of thinking about what works against spiritual and interpersonal growth, and communitarian or social justice practices that foster the common good, including the preservation of the one planet we all share.

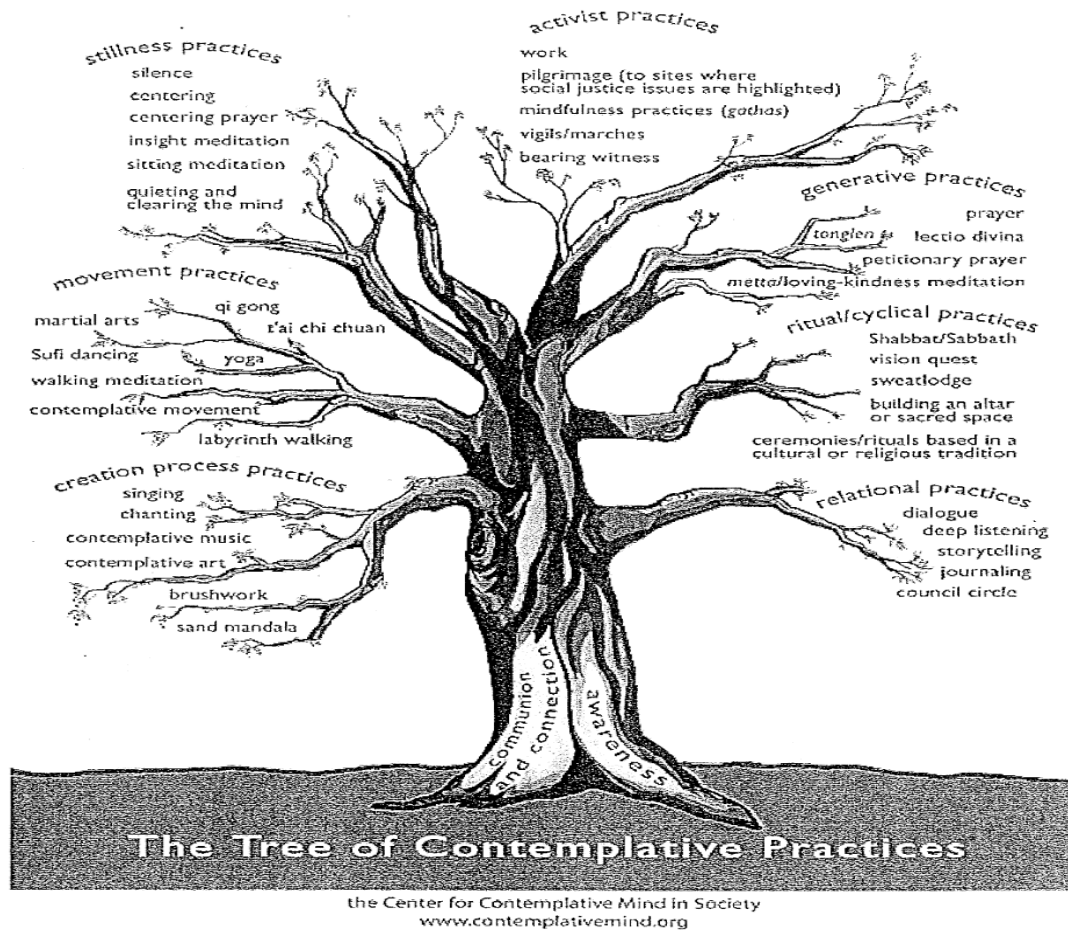
These reflective ways of choosing and experimenting with a variety of practices explicitly support deepening our relationship with God, growth in discipleship, relationships with our near beloveds and service of our neighbor near and far.

Contrast the framework I have just discussed with the approach to spiritual practices portrayed in this attractive and appealing, "Tree of Practices" or menu of choices. This is one representation of spirituality practices, collected from many traditions but completely deracinated from them. The descriptors are appealing as are the activities themselves. But unlike the approach of the four theologians cited above, there is no conceptual context supplied that

⁷ See Jacob Weisberg's essay in *The New York Review of Books*, "We are Hopelessly Hooked" which reviews the work of Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, and *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, as well as Joseph M. Reagle Jr. *Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web*, and Nir Eyal with Ryan Hoover's *Hooked: How to Build Habit-forming Products*, February 26, 2016. 6-9. Weisberg discusses major negative social changes resulting from the appearance of smart phones in 2007. These changes are sufficiently dehumanizing and threatening to our capacity to maintain robust relational lives that antidotes might well figure in our choices of practices supporting love of God and love of neighbor.

might offer guidance about how to use this menu in the service of growth in one's spiritual life, focused on a real relationship with God

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[Table Conversation Around the two Schemas]

I want to spend the last portion of my time with you on two issues—nonviolence and empathy.

We are living in an unprecedented time of degraded discourse in the public square, intense manipulation of our feelings which dehumanizes “others:” immigrants, women , and

those who do not conform to the standard sexual binary designations of gender identity, and a general loss of relational skills that diminishes our capacity to accommodate difference and to relate to all persons, regardless of their particular characteristics with gentleness, kindness and empathy.

Empathy and Nonviolence

I want to reflect briefly on our Mercy family recommitment to approaching all of our critical concerns through the lens of nonviolence as well as the need to both express and foster empathy, which is the psychological basis of compassionate response in all of our ministries. Critical assessment on the uses and abuses of social media and technology show that it interrupts and reduces habits of both empathy and nonviolence, or gentleness. Sherry Turkle's work on the effects of technology has documented a 40% decrease in empathy in college age students from about 2001-2015, and since the arrival of the iPhone in 2007, an even greater breakdown in the practice of conversation and the ability to read human emotions. This includes the loss of the ability to recognize one's own feelings. These losses are most acute among those who use social media the most. Turkle also discovered that the mere presence of a cell phone sitting in sight even when it is turned off, distracts and diminishes conversation and the affective connections of those present.⁸

Compassion arises from an empathic and generous heart. It is often the experience of empathic responses received from another—a parent, a sibling, a friend, a teacher, a therapist—to our own suffering which elicits a similar response from us to another's pain or suffering. As a result, we develop the ability to be compassionate towards our own suffering as well as to that of

⁸ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, New York: Penguin Press, 2015.

others. Even more, since mercy is also effective action, we learn a repertoire of responses from significant others who respond in compassionate and effective ways to our suffering or the pain of others.⁹ and seek to reduce the causes of that suffering.

It is important that in mercy schools that everyone involved live this beatitude, “Blessed are the merciful, for mercy will be theirs.” I firmly believe this is very much the case and has a long history in our schools. We all know and have experienced many times the difference it has made in our own lives when we have been treated with kindness and compassion, and the difference it makes when students, teachers, and staff work together in this spirit to create and sustain such a positive environment for students who are often coping with situations at home and even with each other that we do not really know.

It seems to me that the practice of nonviolence is an indispensable extension of mercy. Our schools should be communities which function from a basic stance of non-violence in the everyday functioning of everyone in the school, including those who must exert discipline. I think what Pope Francis says about families in “Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace” applies equally to educational institutions “ The family is the indispensable crucible in which spouses, parents and children, brothers and sisters, learn to communicate and to show generous concern for one another, and in which frictions and even conflicts have to be resolved not by force but by dialogue, respect, concern for the good of the others, mercy and forgiveness. ...the joy of love spills out into the world and radiates to the whole of society. An ethics of ...peaceful coexistence between individuals and among peoples cannot be based on the logic of fear, violence, and close-mindedness, but on responsibility, respect and sincere dialogue”¹⁰

⁹ Janet K. Ruffing, “Cultivating Compassion” *Human Development Magazine*, 36.1 Fall, 2015, 37.”

¹⁰ Pope Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace”, No. 5. 1 January 2017.

We all know that this is not always the case and that there can be many kinds of abuse playing out in some families. The levels of violence in our society remain quite high from familial sexual abuse, harsh disciplinary measures, and lack of dialogue. Societally, we experience high levels of gun violence, harsh policing measures, and various forms of systemic violence. Even within families, children may not be experiencing empathic responses from parents who are simply overwhelmed or spend little time in simple conversation. As a result, it is even more important to include education in nonviolence as constitutive of the Gospel and of discipleship of Jesus.

For an entire school community to embrace a nonviolent style of education requires considerable self-reflection and education in nonviolent communication and nonviolent methods of intervening in verbal or physical conflicts when they erupt. Marshall Rosenberg's *Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life*, teaches everyone to sense their own deepest feelings and needs as well as correctly recognize those of others, so we can take responsibility for how we behave, think, and feel. It is especially difficult to remain steady in these practices at a time such as our own in which there is so much public hate speech and denigration of many groups in our society. Turkle's work on conversation includes a chapter on Solitude and Self-Reflection. If we or our students occupy every "empty" moment on our phones, we have squandered those moments when we might have spent in self-reflection. Educators can invite brief periods for such introspection and awareness, guiding students in the process with reflection starters or prompts.

Nancy Small, a former national coordinator of Pax Christi, USA, writes passionately and insightfully in *Seizing the Nonviolent Moments*, about what it means to open ourselves to the power of nonviolence so that we can become the leaven of non-violence for others.

The “more” of nonviolence is not to be confused with the “more’ that is craved in our have-it-all society, a ravenous hunger for more stuff, more wealth, and more power. The “more” of nonviolence is about generating more of the stuff that peace is made of. More love. More understanding. More compassion. More equality. More right relationship. We bear witness to the “more” of nonviolence whenever we strive for more freedom, more justice, more wholeness, more peace. The more we strive for peace, the more we strengthen the spirituality of nonviolence. And the more we transform our society.¹¹

Witnessing injustice and hearing abusive language, let alone being oneself the object of these experiences can be enraging and demoralizing. Anger is the appropriate response to injustice. It registers indignity and moves us to action. However, responding in kind without reflection and skillfulness, escalates the situation which can rapidly become emotionally or physically dangerous. Learning how to interrupt a violent situation nonviolently requires training and practice and an accurate evaluation of the situation itself. As a result, it is important to learn and practice tested techniques that are as safe as possible both for the victim and for us who may be interrupters of harassment or some other form of violence or threat which we witness or are invited to help resolve. This takes practice and an accurate ability to interpret the situation.

Finally, I want to spend a very short time on the current debased discourse in our society. Social Worker and Researcher, Brene Brown posted a short essay on her blog in which she describes how the process of dehumanization begins with language. She found that when people

¹¹ *Seizing the Nonviolent Moments: Reflections on the Spirituality of Nonviolence through the Lens of Scripture*. Eugene: Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015, 18.

she interviewed talked about feeling “unsafe or threatened They were not talking about getting their feelings hurt or being forced to listen to dissenting opinions; they were talking about *dehumanizing* language and behavior. David Smith, the author of *Less than Human*, explains that dehumanization is a response to conflicting motives. We want to harm a group of people, but it goes against our wiring as members of a social species actually to harm, kill, torture, or degrade other humans. Smith explains that there are very deep and natural inhibitions that prevent us from treating people like animals, game, or dangerous predators. ‘Dehumanization’ is a way of subverting those inhibitions.”

Michelle Maise from Emmanuel College defines dehumanization as “the psychological process of demonizing the enemy, making them seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment.” This process begins with creating an *enemy image*. Once we see people on “the other side” of a conflict as morally inferior and even dangerous, the conflict starts being framed as good versus evil. Once this is set up, the positions become more rigid, making the parties believe that they must either secure their victory or face defeat.

This process has fueled innumerable acts of violence, human rights violations, war crimes, and genocides. It makes slavery, torture, and human trafficking possible. Dehumanizing others is the process by which we become accepting of violations against human nature, the human spirit, and for many of us, violations against the central tenets of our faith”.¹²

Even more sobering Brown says that we are all vulnerable to the slow and insidious practice of dehumanizing, therefore we are all responsible for recognizing it and stopping it. Stopping it requires “rehumanizing” and reversing the process with words and images.

¹² Cited by Brown, 5,17,2018.

Brown understands that we are edging closer and closer to a world where political and ideological discourse has become an exercise in dehumanization. And social media are the primary platforms for this behavior. On Twitter and Facebook it is easy to push those we disagree with into the dangerous territory of moral exclusion, with little to no accountability, and often in complete anonymity.

She advises that when we hear people referred to as animals or aliens, or in any way less than human we should wonder, “Is this an attempt to reduce someone’s humanity so we can get away with hurting them or denying them basic rights.”

She observes in this blog that “raging, fearful people from the right and left are crossing (this line) at unprecedented rates every single day. And we must never tolerate dehumanization—the primary instrument of violence that has been used in every genocide recorded throughout history. Further, dehumanizing and holding people accountable are mutually exclusive.”¹³

I hope these reflections on the Gentleness of God and ways of critically reflecting on spirituality and spiritual practices, with an emphasis on compassion and nonviolence have been helpful to you and offered some fresh insights about how you might reflect on your own spirituality and how you might continue to nurture the spirituality of your students and the school community.

Gentle Spirit, assure us that the turbulent animosity and violence of this era can be lessened when we express your *love* in our attitudes and actions.

Gentle God, weave your *peace* through leaders of nations whose governance supports and encourages domination over other human beings.

Gentle Wisdom, guide us in the ways of peace and reconciliation.

Gentle Spirit, fill us with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness.

¹³ <https://brenebrown.com/blog/2018/05/17/Dehumanizing-Always-Starts-with-Language>, accessed on 9/8/2018.

Gentle God, expand our empathy and fill us with you compassion.¹⁴

¹⁴ Inspired by Dumont, *Ibid.*, XCIII-XIX, Joyce Rupp, *Prayers of Boundless Compassion*, Notre Dame Press, 2018,70-71.