

“Breathing Under Water: Step 11 An Alternative Mind”
Mark 1:32-39

There are different levels and kinds of knowing in life. We know things through our minds, our senses, our feelings, our hearts, our souls, and our relationships. There is a huge difference between knowing things only with our minds and knowing things with our senses, our hearts or souls. In our culture, there is a great bias toward knowing things with our minds. We like to define and analyze reality. Yet, that level of knowledge is often inadequate if it is not accompanied by other ways of knowing. This is especially true when it comes to our relationship with God. Growing up in the Protestant Reformed tradition, I loved studying theology and learning about God. I loved reading the Bible stories and analyzing their meaning and implications for our lives. I loved memorizing scripture verses and being able to recite them by heart. But that by itself was not enough for me to really know God. This was like knowing about being a parent through books and other people’s experiences which did not become real for me until the birth of our daughter. No books or any kind of theoretical understanding of being a parent could have replaced the power of holding my daughter in my arms for the first time. We all have had those experiences where we might have known about something or someone but to really know through personal experience brings our knowledge to a whole new level.

Here is an example of this kind of knowing. It is a short video of a little girl experiencing the rain for the first time:

<https://time.com/5997/watch-a-toddler-experience-rain-for-the-first-time/>

(For second service: Some of us who have not lived through the blizzard of 77 can only imagine what it must have felt like when we hear about it from those who actually experienced it, but our level of knowledge is limited because we did not have that experience.)

This is the invitation of Step 11 which says (screen): “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.” It is an invitation to know God through prayer and meditation. We have to remember that these words were written way before meditation was as well-known and popular as it is today. This is not an invitation to learn about God. It is instead an invitation to spend time with God and to know God in a deeper way than just with our intellects.

The words that really speak to me in this step are “conscious contact.” We may have moments of awe in our lives where the mystery of God grips us, but to be intentional about prayer and meditation improves our conscious contact with God. Jesus modeled this kind of intentionality for us. He knew that a conscious contact was not going to happen by accident and if he only focused on action in ministry. Preaching, teaching, healing, and challenging the systems of the world needed to be grounded in his deep connection to God. Even though he was the Son of God and had the Spirit of God in him in a special way, he did not take his prayer life for granted. Jesus knew the destructive power of our human egos and how it often hinders us from being free to know God’s love and to share

it freely in the world. Jesus offered an alternative way of being in the world. The peace he offered was not like the peace the Roman government and the popular culture offered which came through control and violence. He knew that knowing reality through the Spirit of God needed intentional times of prayer and meditation. (Read Mark 1:32-39)

In his book *Breathing Under Water*, Richard Rohr talks about the importance of meditation and prayer not just to help us feel peaceful but to really allow a different kind of knowledge of reality to emerge in us. He writes (screen), “the word meditation, is a code word for an entirely different way of processing life. When you ‘pray,’ you are supposed to take off one ‘thinking cap’ and put on another ‘thinking cap’ that will move you from an egocentric perspective to a soul-centric perspective...I call the first perspective ‘the calculating mind,’ and I call the second perspective ‘the contemplative mind.’”

Differences between “The Calculating Mind” and “The Contemplative Mind” are at the heart of much of our struggles. Rohr writes that, “The first mind sees everything through the lens of its own private needs and hurts, angers and memories. It is too small a lens to see truthfully, wisely, or deeply. The contemplative mind is an alternative processing system that is actually a positive widening of your lens for a better picture. It is hard work to learn how to pray this way, largely the work of emptying the mind and filling the heart.”

We often hear the simple phrase (screen), “What Would Jesus Do?” This is supposed to help us gain a different perspective, but the problem is that we try to use the same mind tools to get the answers.

Jesus knew the value of deepening one’s prayer life and taking the time to get away from all the ego stuff of life. That is what kept him grounded and focused on his purpose in life. He invited the disciples to do the same thing. He showed them the way.

Throughout history the people who have made the greatest difference for good in the world have been people who knew the value of improving their conscious contact with God (or a Higher Power). The people who have led great movements of social change through nonviolent means were people grounded in practices of prayer and meditation. Mr. Rogers is one of those examples. His prayer life informed much of his ministry. This is what he had to say in an interview about the people who have impacted his life.

<https://youtu.be/mSbYQz3rluM> (the first 50 seconds)

He modeled this kind of silence and wonder in what he taught. Many children’s shows were trying to fill every second with entertainment, while he took the risk to share something unpopular but powerful. Here a clip about breathing deeply.

<https://youtu.be/TTae-JL3Qnk>

Bill Wilson, the founder of AA, knew through his own experience the power of such connection with God. His mission was not to convert people to a religion or to have them recite Bible verses or a certain set of doctrines or prayers. His mission was to help people have a direct experience of God so that they may know firsthand the healing power of such encounters. Here is a brief overview of Bill’s spiritual awakening: “Before drafting the Big Book, Bill had been a skeptic about spiritual matters. In his autobiography, he

describes himself at one point as 'incapable of faith.' That changed later, when Bill came to see himself as an alcoholic doomed to an early death unless he stopped drinking. One night, during a hospital stay, Bill cried out, 'If there be a God, let him show himself.' The response was immediate: 'Suddenly my room blazed with an indescribably white light. I was seized with an ecstasy beyond description. . . . Then came the blazing thought, 'You are a free man.'" (From Bill W. My First 40 Years, page 145)

Bill continued to have doubts about faith, but later became more aware of the power of prayer and mediation to change one's mind and ability to see reality. He would often say, "Do the experiment. You'll discover that prayer and meditation work, and that "almost the only scoffers at prayer are those who have never tried it enough."

Bill then recommended three ways to practice prayer and meditation during the day for those in recovery in order for them to practice Step 11. I put these in the bulletin//announcements for this week.

In the morning (intention and meditation)

"On awakening let us think about the twenty-four hours ahead," notes the Big Book. "We consider our plans for the day. Before we begin, we ask God to direct our thinking, especially asking that it be divorced from self-pity, dishonest or self-seeking motives."

Of course, people in recovery often face uncertainty. Even when we're open to good orderly direction, we can still be unclear about moment-to-moment choices in daily life.

In response, the Big Book suggests that we "relax and take it easy." Instead of struggling, we can wait patiently for an answer to come. Over time, we'll find that "what used to be the hunch or the occasional inspiration gradually becomes a working part of the mind." The Big Book further suggests that we end our morning meditation with a prayer to receive guidance throughout the day for the next action to take. And the sum total of our needs in this area can be summarized in one phrase: Thy will, not mine, be done.

Throughout the day (mindfulness)

After grounding our day in morning practice, we can stay open to guidance while moving through events at work or home. When we're feeling emotionally unbalanced or confused, we can simply stop for a moment and ask our Higher Power for an appropriate thought or action. At especially difficult times we can repeat a helpful passage from our reading or a particular prayer that we find meaningful.

At night (examen)

During his lectures about Step Eleven, Holmquist emphasizes the unity of the Steps. In fact, Steps Four to Nine prepare us for most of the processes described in Steps Ten and Eleven. This is especially clear in the Big Book's list of questions to ask at night, as we review and end each day. For example:

- Were we resentful, selfish, dishonest or afraid? "This means asking how I did on my Fourth Step today," says Holmquist.
- Do we owe an apology? "This is asking about how I did on my Steps Eight and Nine."
- Have we kept something to ourselves which should be discussed with another person at once? "This means: How did I do on Step Five today?"

"In Steps Four through Nine, I clean up the wreckage of the past," Holmquist adds. "In Steps Ten and Eleven, I clean up the wreckage of today--how my imperfections as a human complicate my life. These two Steps define what it means to completely give ourselves to this simple program."

We will end using one of the well-known prayers attributed to St. Francis: Make Me a Channel of Your Peace. Take a few deep breaths. Become centered and calm. As I read the prayer, imagine yourself at your favorite spot quiet spot in the world. Picture yourself as a channel of God's peace, love, and goodness. Let them flow through you. (music in the background: <https://youtu.be/2GS9ThG1Rx8>)

Prayer: Lord, make me a channel of thy peace; that where there is hatred, I may bring love; that where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness; that where there is discord, I may bring harmony; that where there is error, I may bring truth; that where there is doubt, I may bring faith; that where there is despair, I may bring hope; that where there are shadows, I may bring light; that where there is sadness, I may bring joy. Lord, grant that I may seek to comfort rather than to be comforted; to understand, than to be understood; to love, than to be loved. For it is by self-forgetting that one finds. It is by forgiving that one is forgiven. It is by dying that one awakens to eternal life. Amen.