

LETTER XIV

Temperance, Arcanum of Inspiration

Spiritual Exercise: The Angel of Nonduality



Therefore, dear Unknown Friend, think of your guardian Angel... when you have problems, questions to resolve, tasks to accomplish, plans to formulate, cares and fears to appease! Think of him as a luminous cloud of maternal love above you, moved by the sole desire to serve you and to be useful to you. (page 379)

Temperance, as a spiritual exercise, signifies the task of knowing the relationship between the image or monad, the likeness or phenomenal personality, and the guardian Angel or individual grace. This means to say that one should find the source, current and direction of inner life—in grasping its nature and role—and work and live in conformity with this knowledge. (page 387)

One of the loveliest of tarot images, Temperance is also as strange as it is beautiful, featuring an androgynous (nonbinary?) angel pouring a liquid between two vessels *at an angle*. Clearly, this is an image representing a moment in which the normal rules of physics no longer apply! We are being invited into a direct encounter with mystery through this image. Remember, an angel is a “messenger” — a messenger of God; the earliest representations of angels in the Hebrew Scriptures simply describes the celestial being as “the Angel of the Lord” — in other words, God’s messenger. It is only in the later ages of the mystical imagination that we begin to think of angels as

having different “ranks” or “choirs” (Angels, Archangels, Principalities, Virtues, Powers, Dominions, Thrones, Cherubim and Seraphim) as well as identifying angels with specific names (Raphael, Michael, Gabriel), specific functions, and/or specific roles (such as the guardian angel or the angel of death).

The author of *Meditations on the Tarot* seems to see Temperance as representing both a generic image of an angel, but also the guardian angel, each of whom is in a unique relationship with a particular mortal being. But early in the meditation, our author offers this fascinating window into his view of this being: “Is he not the one who bears the good news that beyond the duality of “either-or” there is—or is possible—still that of ‘not only-but also’ or ‘both-and?’” (page 374) Although he never uses this particular term, this quote and other ideas in this letter suggest that the author sees the angel of Temperance as an *Angel of Nonduality*. Later on, we see the importance to this meditation of integrating Mary and Martha, or activity and passivity, or contemplation and action. In other words, the “message” this “Angel of the Lord” seems to be bringing to us is simply this: that in the reconciliation of apparent opposites, the capacity to hold the tension of a paradox in an interior unity, we are made more fully available for God to act in our souls, heal us of our brokenness and empower us to do the work that we are called to do.

As I read the meditation, I realized that the heart of this message: of the necessity and integral unity of contemplation and action — is something many contemplatives of my generation take for granted, thanks to the good work of contemporary teachers like Richard Rohr (who named his entire ministry the “Center for *Action and Contemplation*” showing how important this principle is). But what may seem to be a commonplace idea to us here in the twenty-first century was by no means seen as obvious to previous generations. Many medieval writers, like the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, go to considerable lengths to try to understand the ideal relationship between the two sisters, seeing Martha as the icon of action and Mary the icon of contemplation (and for contemplation authors, it often went without saying that “Mary has chosen the better part” meant contemplation was higher than action!). The Renaissance and Reformation brought a new understanding, but still not always seen as self-evident. Thus, for Teresa of Ávila, the great revelation of the innermost mansion in *The Interior Castle* is the essential unity of Mary and Martha.

So what authors of earlier times felt was a summit-level mystical teaching, we are blessed to see as a foundational principle for contemplatives of our day — especially those of us who do not live in cloistered or communal religious settings. The very demands of life itself impel us to action, and the God-shaped hole in our restless hearts calls us into silence and stillness. As we meditate on the Angel of Temperance,

we are invited to allow the guidance of the Spirit to so integrate these two energies into our lives that they become one flow of divine guidance and calling. Someone (I can't recall who) once said that the summit of mystical teaching is the recognition that "God and I are not-two." But that recognition is not merely a question of identity, it also shapes how we conduct our lives. Our action and our contemplation is "not-two." We act by praying, and we pray by acting. As we learn to recognition how these two dimensions of live coinhere and inspire each other, we become equipped to fulfill the apostle Paul's challenge to "Pray without ceasing" (I Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer becomes as essential to life, ongoing life, as breathing lungs or a beating heart. Sometimes we pray in silence and stillness, and sometimes we pray in our action. But always, by divine grace, always we pray.

Spiritual Exercise: Pray Without Ceasing (at all levels of consciousness)

When I was a young person working with my first spiritual director, I was fresh out of Graduate School, living alone, and working hard to establish myself professionally. I wanted intimacy with God, but my life was too undisciplined for me to sustain a daily prayer practice (or so I thought). As I made excuses to my spiritual director, she — a grandmotherly UCC pastor named Lin — was having none of my feeble complaints about "how busy I was." "What time do you get up each morning?" she asked. "My alarm is set for 6," I replied (carefully omitting how I was addicted to the snooze button). "Then set your alarm for 5:30," she practically commanded me. Knowing that I was being seen as someone who was resisting the invitation to intimacy with God, I lamely replied, "I don't think I have enough discipline to get up that early." She softened a little (but not much). "I suppose you don't, because none of us really do. You need to go home tonight, get on your knees, and ask God for the grace of a daily prayer practice."

So I did just that (and I set my alarm 30 minutes earlier). The next morning, believe it or not, I got out of bed without hitting the snooze button once, and gave twenty minutes to silent prayer. The same thing happened the next morning, and the morning after that. When I next saw my spiritual director, I reported to her with a mixture of pride and amazement, that I had prayed every morning but one that month.

It's been almost 40 years, and I wish I could say that one petition for God's grace to help me pray had been enough to make me steadfast with my daily practice ever since. The truth is much messier than that: I've missed many days over the years. But I keep coming back to it, and these days the missed days tend to be fairly infrequent. There

are so many other areas of my life in which I continue to be undisciplined (!) that I am convinced my prayer practice is completely the result of God's grace.

Your story will be different, of course. But I think this principle is sound: Ask God (either directly, or through the intercession of God's messenger, our guardian angel) for what we want and need. I suspect the fact that you are reading these words (indicating that you are persevering in your study of *Meditations on the Tarot*) is evidence enough that you want, at least on some level, intimacy with God, an unceasing prayer life, and a sense of being guided and guarded by your heavenly protector.

Your exercise for this month is very simple: *ask for your angel's help* in regard to your daily spiritual practice. If you struggle with discipline ("I never have time to pray" or "I don't pray as much as I would to") then ask for the graces of discipline and stability in your daily practice. Ask for the resiliency to bounce back when you do miss a day (or a year). If your prayer time is fidgety and restless, as your monkey mind screeches with distraction after distracting distraction, pray for the kind of inner clarity that resembles the crystalline stillness of a calm body of water. Pray for the intuitive grace to allow distractions to come and go, gently, lightly, with no fuss. Pray for the ability to notice the silence between your distracting thoughts, even if at first you only catch millisecond-long glimpses. Pray that those glimpses may slow down, linger, and become more available to your watching awareness.

And then... ask for the grace to pray without ceasing. Ask for the grace to recognize all the activities of your life as so many dimensions of prayer. Ask for the ability to see the activity in your prayer, and the prayer in your activity. Ask for the intuitive sense of trust that allows you to pray at a level deeper than your conscious awareness: continually, ceaselessly. To pray without ceasing means to pray at all levels of consciousness: even while sleeping or daydreaming. Ask your guardian for the grace to pray without ceasing, at all levels of consciousness.

I would encourage you to pair this kind of petitionary angel-prayer with your existing practice of Centering Prayer, *lectio divina*, or whatever contemplative exercise you do regularly (or wish you did regularly). Don't just do it once or twice, either. Check in with your guardian angel as often as you can, ideally at least once a day. It's okay to repeat your request, or do expand it and explore the nuances within it. You may wish to keep a journal for reflecting on how your prayer to your angel seems to be shaping the rest of your prayer life. It's worth taking time to notice and reflect on.