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What I Have Been Doing

I confess that I have been busy lately. And I mean it when I say that *I confess* that I have been busy. Complaining about busy-ness is, for a teacher in spirituality, a sin. Last NewesLetter I tell you about how Cheri offered me rhythm of life and now I tell you that I have been busy -- WRONG!

Nevertheless, here is what I have been doing.

Roof/Ranch

The completion of our roof continued to dominate our attention the entire year. I had no idea just how complicated it was to install concrete tile on a roof with bay windows and chimneys and crickets joining one building to another, and doing it all with scavenged materials. And then, we simply *had* to finish before the snow fell. And sure enough, a week after I finished, the snow fell. Work at the ranch was pretty straight forward this year. It was extremely dry and we pray for moisture in the coming year.

Visitors

We had our share of visitors. Michael Clifford, coordinator for the Aprentis Institute at Friends University, dropped by for a pilot internship in Desert Spirituality in June. All went well and we expect to have regular interns from Friends coming to learn about Desert Spirituality in our high desert location. Our friends Dan and Jan Schmitz came from the center of Oakland for a retreat/vacation in July. In mid-August we hosted the entire InnerCHANGE Outer Circle team for a week. A great time of parties and one-on-one nurturing. We hosted Kevin Seidel, an student from our San Francisco Vineyard days (who now teaches Literature at Eastern Mennonite University) who came to present a lecture on the King James Bible at our local library. And most significantly, our oldest daughter Claire came home from her work with the homeless in San Francisco for a large chunk of her Sabbatical from October

through December. She actually just left yesterday. It was truly precious to spend this extended time with her and to see her off into the next stage of her ministry with InnerCHANGE.

Trips

I also had a few trips here and there myself. At the beginning of August I traveled to Denver (where Terese and I shared time doing our annual "family survey") and then spent a week near Estes Park, Colorado at the All InnerCHANGE Conference. I presented workshops on missions in early monasticism and on the metaphysics of power and did a lot of spiritual direction. The first week of October I traveled to Colorado Springs to serve at the Missions Leaders Conference where I offered a seminar on "The Spirit and Spiritual Formation" and again did a lot of spiritual formation and consulting, both formal and informal. In November I traveled to Milwaukee and Chicago to attend to meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society, The American Academy of Religion, and the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. I presented papers on "The Hermeneutics of Lectio Divina" (basically on the relationship between approaches to Biblical interpretation and devotional Bible reading) and on Evagrius of Pontus' approach to contemplative prayer. I also got together with other scholars of Christian spirituality to nurture the study and practice of our relationship with God.

Writing, Teaching, and More

And then there was writing, local teaching and "production." I had my usual semesters of teaching Critical Thinking and Intro to Philosophy at Colorado Mesa University, where I explored hunches about "teaching from the bottom up." I helped the local library here win a 6 week exhibition on the King James Bible (in honor of the 400 year anniversary) and presented a lecture in December on "Spiritual Practice and the King James Bible." I have also been teaming up with a few wonderful people in town to write articles for the "Church Page" of our local paper. We work together as a team writing and editing the columns. Our basic aim is to promote the unity of the churches in Montrose serving the needs of Montrose. So far things have gone really well. I sense something of an anointing in the midst of this group of very different people working together. We shall see what comes of it in the

long run. I am just about finished with an adult education class in our church in which I spent twelve weeks surveying the entire Bible. I have joined the search committee of our congregation in order to help the process as our current rector prepares for retirement. I have been offering spiritual direction to several people. And Cheri and I lead worship about once a month at our church (and more during Christmas season!).

When InnerCHANGE invited me to speak at their conference, they also gave me complete freedom to choose my topics of presentation. I have been wanting to synthesize my thinking about some philosophical issues relevant to spiritual formation, politics and spiritual warfare (among other things) for some time. So I took this opportunity to put together my thoughts on "The Metaphysics of Power." In two weeks I produced a 72 page summary of my own thoughts to date. I put it up on my website just for posterity. It is a pretty rough and complicated piece of writing, but it is a way of letting people know where I am coming from. I'm glad to have had the opportunity to get this all down in writing. While I was at the InnerCHANGE conference, I was invited to contribute in other ways, which I have completed in the past few months. I wrote a follow-up evaluation of the conference, giving my two bits regarding where I see God leading this ministry. I conducted a Skype interview with one member who is planning on editing it for mass distribution with the ministry. I wrote a paper on "Advancing the Gospel Together: Reflections on Missionary Orders and Other Religious Associations Old and New" which will be available on my website. Finally, during Christmas break, Claire and I produced a video "Introduction to Christian Missionary Orders" that InnerCHANGE will use in their Orientation sessions.

Just before I left for Estes Park in August I received a call from one of my colleagues asking me to help him complete a chapter on "pentecostal/charismatic spirituality" for the *Cambridge Companion on Pentecostalism*. I received that invitation just as the Vineyard Missions Leaders were inviting me to share with them. It seemed like the right thing to do, so I agreed to both assignments. The chapter on Pentecostal spirituality took a lot of work, but I was pleased to be a part of this prestigious project and

to explore further my own association with the Charismatic stream of Christianity.

And along with all this I have had my share of endorsements, manuscripts to read, and book reviews to write. I was also invited to serve as an official "reader" for a doctoral student's dissertation this fall. First time I have ever functioned in this capacity.

So, having heard all this, you can believe me when I say that *I confess* that I have been busy. And yet--whether for better or for worse--I have loved nearly everything I have done.

What I See Ahead of Me

Now let me say something about what I see as I look forward. First, I do expect that we will be having regular interns in the warmer months. Cheri and I have discussed this carefully and have worked it out that we can receive a few (and only a few) interns each year, sharing our rhythm with others without destroying it in the process of caring for guests.

I continue to be invited to teach spirituality here and there, but with no guarantee that anything will come of these invitations. I received two invitations this past year to teach at seminaries that did not materialize. The first invitation (A class on "Monasticism Old and New") was particularly disappointing, as I spent a lot of time in preparation for the class. I still have a pending invitation to teach at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto in August of 2014. We shall see what happens. If anything, my opportunities to teach philosophy here in Montrose are expanding. The college has approved both Ethics and Philosophy of Religion as courses which fulfill general Humanities requirements. I now have the freedom to teach any of these at the Montrose campus. However, in the fall (before I knew that my Monasticism class would be canceled or that they would permit this range of classes in Montrose) I declared that I was going to take this spring off from teaching at Colorado Mesa University. I wanted some time to do reading in preparation for the chapter on Politics for my Introduction to Philosophy text, and to make some forward progress in my monastic history research. Last spring I offered a class in Montrose on early monasticism (not connected to CMU). It went well

and people had requested that I offer another class. So this year, perhaps even in a few weeks, I will offer an "Introduction to Whole Gospel Living" helping people to appreciate the riches of the whole body of Christ and to appropriate these riches in their own lives. I am just in the "are-you-interested?" stage of developing the class. We shall see what happens.

Where I most clearly hear of an interest is from people who want me to produce audio-video productions. I have received numerous requests for podcasts, online classes, Youtube seminars and other similar productions. Like I mentioned, I produced a video introduction to Orders for InnerCHANGE. While I was in Chicago, Jim Wilhoit (my co-author of *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life*) and I produced a series of five videos introducing the practice of lectio divina. You can find them by searching for "Discovering Lectio Divina" on Youtube. I have been invited to create a video course on Desert spirituality that would be used to train African pastors and leaders. I have bought a little bit of equipment this year and am just beginning to explore the world of digital communication. But there is a serious learning curve associated with developing these new forms of communication.

Some of my interest in digital communication has risen in response to what I have experienced in the publishing industry. Two books I have co-authored were published this past year (*Discovering Lectio Divina, Four Views on Christian Spirituality*). While the reviews of these books have been favorable, the sales have been less than I had hoped for. While I was in Chicago in May I had an interview with the editors of another publishing company. We talked about book ideas for the future and they expressed excitement about one idea in particular. I submitted a proposal and sample chapter which all appreciated. Yet a few weeks later I learned that I did not have the "platform" to secure enough sales for the proposed book. They kindly wished me good luck. So I did some talking around, and in the process I discovered that my experience was not uncommon. Christian book sales are down everywhere. Put simply, in a digital age, people are less inclined to learn through reading books. I have a number of peers who write with the expectation that they will not receive any royalties from their

books. Some have started writing books only to have the publisher cancel in mid-creation. The publisher for the chapter on pentecostal spirituality that I spent a month of research working on repays its contributors with free books. Furthermore, while I was in Milwaukee I had a meeting with the editor of my *Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*. He stated that the sales are insufficient to keep this book in print as is. He feels that the content is good, but that I need to repackage the material: make it shorter, more accessible, and so on. I am honored that they are not simply dropping the book. I am pleased that a book which has had so much respect among evangelical scholars in Christian spirituality will now have a chance to be rewritten for ordinary students. And yet I also honestly feel (when I am at my worst) the weight of taking this book that took me eight years to write and writing it once again, unsure of its future.

I continue to contribute to the academic field of Christian spirituality gratis. The assumption in this world is that you have a post in an institution of higher learning and that out of that place you do things to promote your field of study. I write articles for journals (for example, my review of the 800 page *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* recently published in the *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*) and even manage whole editions of journals (I will be co-coordinating the production of an upcoming edition of this journal on contemplative prayer) for which I never receive compensation. I have accepted an invitation to serve as part of the nominating committee for the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, for which I will spend time connecting with members of the Society. This kind of work is simply part of what it means to be a scholar. But it feels a little different when you don't have that full-time university position from which you operate.

What I See Within - Reflections on the Ministry of Independent Contemplative Study

Consideration on all of this has led me to further reflections on the ministry of Spirituality Shoppe. The purpose of Spirituality Shoppe since 1995 has been "to research, interpret, and cultivate the Christian's relationship with God through Jesus Christ, both in individual and corporate dimensions,

through the exploration of semi-monastic lifestyle, academic pursuit, ecumenical experience, and appropriate expression." Spirituality Shoppe is essentially a ministry of independent contemplative study. But what does this mean? What do I have to offer Christ and others? How is this best done? How can others receive from what I have to offer and how do I receive from them? A few things come to mind as I ponder my work:

1. The ministry of independent contemplative study offers a great deal of freedom

First, the independent ministry of contemplative study offers a great deal of freedom. Just before I went to Colorado Springs to work with the Vineyard folks I took my monthly retreat. I had nearly finished my chapter on Pentecostal spirituality. My chapter on Evangelical spirituality had recently been published in the *Four Views on Christian Spirituality*. I had been increasingly been burdened regarding my desire to "fast from oppression," something God spoke to me about in Assisi. I was also keenly interested in the relationship between the desert traditions (Evagrius and such) and the nineteenth century holiness movement. My writings with the local newspaper had gotten me increasingly fired up about sharing life ecumenically with the whole body of Christ in Montrose. But I was not quite sure what step to take next. How was I to explore or to embody these vast riches of the body of Christ? Well, when I went to Colorado Springs, I received a powerful experience of God. Without going into details, all I can share here is that in this time, God set me free emotionally, in a new way, to be myself and to choose who I really want to become. And for me that means diving as deep as I can realistically dive into all the traditions of the Christian faith all at the same time.

While some are called to dwell in the midst of a single tradition, it appears that I am called to explore them all. And this "career" gives me full freedom to do just that. I am not tied to denominationally-owned institutions or specific monastic cultures. I can explore the fasting practices of the desert traditions (to purify the passions) and, the extended "desperation" fasts characteristic of the evangelical and charismatic traditions (fasting and praying for revival, for example) , AND a kind of

"fasting from oppression" (fair trade only?) characteristic of the social justice traditions all at the same time. Generally, neither pastors nor monks nor teachers nor popular writers have this kind of freedom. I can jump from topic to topic or from interest to interest without fear of being fired. I can keep my work at the scholarly level until I feel I understand it well enough to make it accessible in a different format. And while I do not have the formal connections and sense of role as others, I still have--through a board of directors, a spiritual director, some good friends, and a wonderful wife--a system of support and accountability that can keep me on the path. What a sweet situation: for me and, ultimately I think, for others as well!

2. The ministry of independent contemplative study produces results but they are less tangible and often emerge in the long term.

Second, the ministry of contemplative study is a work wherein one does not often see clear results, but if you look closely they are there. Spirituality Shoppe does not evangelize the lost, plant churches, feed the hungry, or visit the homeless. I am keenly aware of the fact that I really believe in all of those activities yet do very little of it concretely myself. When I am at my worst, I beat myself with my lack of service to God. But when I am at my best, I know that the ministry of contemplative study does have its own kind of results. I spent years praying and meditating--and learning how to pray and meditate as a Christian. Then I traveled to India and offer my discoveries to a few friends who wanted to set up a Christian meditation group among seekers in India. Now there are a number of groups in India, Thailand and the United States that are using some of my ideas. I spent many years studying and writing the *Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*. While it has not sold a lot of copies, still it is one of the most recommended books by scholars in Zondervan's *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. I was asked to represent evangelicalism in the *Four Views of Christian Spirituality*. I wrote a little guide to Life-Transition discernment that was shared around the globe. I wrote the inaugural article of the *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*. I am witnessing things I have hoped and prayed and

studied about for twenty years. The results of a life of contemplative study are not always very visible, but they are real. I must always keep this in mind. I remember just before we started Spirituality Shoppe walking around our house ranting to Cheri about think tanks. "If they can have think tanks about international relations and serious physical illness," I would exclaim, "why can't they have think tanks for the benefit of our relationship with God?" My hope and prayer is that I have contributed --and continue to contribute--something to the betterment of human spiritual life through my investment in prayerful reflection and reflective prayer.

3. The ministry of independent contemplative study is wisely structured as a system of free giving and receiving

When I started Spirituality Shoppe, I structured it as a non-profit corporation with a 501(C3) status. This was because when I inquired of the Lord regarding how I was to "make a living" in Montrose and then began to pursue the idea of a Center for the study of Christian spirituality, I felt like God encouraged me that "there would be a few people who would believe in me and my work, and they would support me." For the first few years of our ministry, things went well. I offered what I had to give and I received support. but as the economy struggled, and as time created distance between myself and others, financial support for Spirituality Shoppe suffered. At the same time I started publishing books and receiving opportunities to teach. Perhaps these "gigs" would cover the gap in Spirituality Shoppe income? I waited to see what would happen.

Well, over the past few years I have learned that ultimately those other opportunities did not cover the need, and it is realistically likely that they will not in the future. Furthermore, I found myself nearly getting caught in the trap of mentally creating a universe for myself as a "writer" or a "teacher" (even a teacher of philosophy), as a means of finding security about our income. No, my career is one of contemplative study. That is what I am called to. Yes, I will produce things and teach things. But my identity should not be placed in the things I produce. My calling is to the environment from which the

products arise. It is a fine line to walk at times, but when I am at my best, I can see it. I feel like I am not to live by an economics of production and consumption, but rather by an economics of giving and receiving. When I was at the InnerCHANGE conference at Estes Park, I brought some of my books to put on a table next to other books and wares people brought from around the world to sell there. Not one of my books sold. At the same time, I sensed the leading of God's Spirit to "give myself away"--and witnessed some remarkable circumstances to support that leading. In the end I joyfully gave away a number of those books. Since then I have taken steps to remodel my website so that I can offer writings, audio files, videos and more to the world. I give freely. But I have also--at my board's advice--created a "donate" button at the bottom of the pages on my website so that others can also freely give and I can freely receive. In earlier centuries, contemplative study was often supported by the patronage of a few who believed in the scholar's work. Perhaps today that is the function of a "donate" button on the web.

Frankly, this seems like an honest way not only of dealing with money, but of dealing with life in general. I think that the financial thing is only symbolic of a much larger giving and receiving of life. I give what I have to offer and I receive from what others have to offer. Yes, at times this is financial support, but just as often I receive from others in terms of hearing their stories, discovering their values and opinions, and sharing in the delightfulness of each individual personality. I share my "life" with some and they share their "life" with me.

4. The ministry of independent contemplative study in the 21st century is wisely distributed through the means of a website

Finally, a very practical thing that I am learning about my ministry of contemplative study is that there are many aspects of this ministry that are best expressed in a website. When I do what is most natural to me, I research for a few months and then write essays. I am not primarily a "blogger." My stuff is often long and complicated. I can (and will) produce things aimed at a less scholarly audience.

But what I do naturally is research. Research does not touch everybody, but it does help a few people who are interested, and perhaps a few people all over the world might be interested. I have learned that in fact this is precisely the case in my situation. Thus, the development of a website that can serve as an archive of resources for the exploration of Christian Spirituality seems to be a very good way for me to serve the body of Christ. And consequently, I am in the middle of a serious website remodel. I had hoped things would be ready for me to "roll out" the new site in this NewsLetter, but all is not finished yet. Still, you can check out the site in process at spiritualityshoppe.org. I will probably still publish a few hard-copy books. I enjoy face-to-face relationship with people and do not wish to leave classrooms and one-on-one relationships. Nevertheless, I do feel like it is time for me to re-learn how to communicate and that spiritualityshoppe.org seems like an excellent format for my work. If you wish, you can "friend" Evan B. Howard on Facebook and I will post my new contributions to the website as they appear. I will also make sure that new contributions are highlighted on the website.

The ministry of contemplative study is a unique ministry. It offers a great deal of freedom for exploration. It produces results, even though they are less tangible and often appear in the long term. The very nature of the ministry and fruits of contemplative study lend itself to a natural system of giving and receiving freedom. In the twenty-first century, the fruits of this kind of ministry are wisely distributed on a website. I guess what I am really saying in this NewsLetter is "stay tuned." I may be offering classes in a distance format. I may be uploading a podcast or video series someday. I may be offering spiritual direction to incarnational ministers among the poor via Skype. Please keep me in your prayers as I seek to serve Christ through the ministry of semi-monastic living, academic pursuit, ecumenical experience, and appropriate expressions.

May God the Father bless you with his riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.