



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

"The Pursuit of Happiness"

excerpted from

Heartfulness: Transformation in Christ

Thomas Keating and Betty Sue Flowers

Keating: Happiness or the desire for happiness is itself an infallible sign of God's presence. No matter what you're looking for as a particular object of happiness, the very fact that you're looking, where does that come from? It's not something we inherit from the animals. They're looking for the immediate gratification of their instinctual needs. But humans have a sense they're looking for something more. Sometimes we can cover that up with a special effort to seek goods that are immediate or passing, but the fact that they never satisfy keeps reminding people that there's something more and then that something more is that uneasy feeling that causes many people, if they listen to that invitation, to go searching for a deeper meaning in life. But as long as the desire for happiness, or the desire to get away from unhappiness – it's the same thing – this itself is the proof that God is in us.

The spiritual journey is really a deliberate anticipation of the passage of death in which one freely and deliberately makes friends with this process that frees one from the limitations of happiness in this world and opens one's whole being to the possibilities that are unknown to us at first but which we've finally come to know in the dying process is not going to work here, in this world.

Flowers: But what if we don't want to wait until we die to find God or for God to find us – however you put it? What if we want to make that connection before the end of life?

Keating: Well, if one has any intelligence I should think that's what one would do. And it's especially poignant because we're born with this innate desire and destiny for perfect happiness without knowing what it is or where it is or how to get there. So, in order to survive, we choose substitutes that are nearest and dearest to us which is the experience we have of our need and its gratification or lack thereof of security, control and affection. So, these needs fossilize into demands that we then try to impose on society and then find ourselves in competition with six and a half billion other people trying to do the same stupid thing. It can't possibly work as we

grow older. The false self is based on the programs to find happiness in those first three emotional programs that correspond, by the way, to the first two or three *chakras* in the Hindu system. Those three instinctual needs are basically for security, power, control and affection, esteem and approval. Essential for the survival of an infant, but totally inappropriate for an adult. First of all, because everybody else has developed those tendencies, into a kind of center of gravity around which their thoughts and desires and preoccupations are circling like planets around the sun. They can't imagine life without the maximum return of these desires. It's these false desires that create the false self and the ideas and habits of mind and the cultural identifications that support this way of thinking.

The net result of that is a sense of separation from God and hence a separation from all reality, other people and all creation in which God also dwells. This is a misconception of what the essence of all religions, at least serious religions, are trying to say that we don't get because of the overlay of our ideas of happiness that we elaborated in early childhood before we had a reason to discern much, and have misunderstood the gratification of our instinctual needs for happiness, which it isn't, and which they can't deliver what we're looking for and we keep trying with bigger and better projects.

Basically, society is dominated by sub-human motivation and the collectivity of selves, false selves, that don't have the common good or the needs of others as their primary concern. Or if they do, it's heavily influenced by selfish motivations.

Repent means change the direction in which you're looking for happiness. Basically, that's the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels and the Sermon on the Mount. In other words, he's trying to undermine the amount of energy that we put into projects for happiness around those three energy centers, what I call the emotional programs for happiness that, when frustrated, give rise to the afflictive emotions of anger, grief, discouragement, greed, lust and avarice – which are really compensatory aspects to get away from the pain of the frustration of what we consider necessary for our happiness. Unless those are somewhat subdued, or unless we're willing to go through a process of subduing them, which is probably more realistic, then we're not going to get too far in sitting down and listening to the word of God in meditation or contemplative prayer.

Flowers: Then how do we get to the prayer, "Thy will be done," which really does, then, enable us to see the help that is already there?

Keating: By silence. By stopping, on a regular period as a discipline, the way we usually think and perhaps the only way to do that is by not thinking at all, at least deliberately, during a specific time of prayer, in order to open ourselves to the deeper dimension not only of our spiritual nature with intuitive capacity for knowing, without intermediary and the spiritual will, which is the true seed of love within us, spiritual love. And opening then to the even deeper level within us of the true Self, and the Divine Indwelling which is our true center.

We can try to change the direction in which we're looking for happiness, but we will not succeed without the grace of God. And for a long time, we think that we will, and this is what delays the process. Effort is designed not for success, but to find out that it doesn't work. That's its chief contribution to the spiritual life.

Now, as soon as you let go of this, even a little bit, a crack occurs in our consciousness and some of the Divine Presence insinuates itself. The purpose, then, of silence, is to give an opportunity for the longing for God to break through the crust of the false self and our defense mechanisms so that we can be motivated by that hunger and that love to pursue the transformative process untiringly.

From this perspective, it's easy to negotiate the entire spiritual journey, because all you have to do is accept it. It already is. It's been done. It's accepted. It's been communicated to us. It's put into our hands. It's put into our mouths. It's poured into our souls by the Holy Spirit. And the only request is to let God love us this much with this much absolutely free and undeserved and unmerited gratuity.