

# ***The Wisdom School – Part 1: A Week at Wisdom School***

by Alan Krema / Originally published in Spirit Journal December 2015

Last month, I was blessed to spend a week in an introductory Wisdom School led by Cynthia Bourgeault. Cynthia is a long-time collaborator with Thomas Keating and her book, “Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening,” is one of the cornerstones of the method of centering prayer. For years, Cynthia has been teaching Wisdom Schools as a means of deepening the awakening of the heart, which is at the core of the Contemplative Outreach mission.

So, what is a “Wisdom School”?

This method of teaching is based on awareness of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit throughout our daily life activities. It teaches us to bracket our day with centering prayer meditation, enveloping the activities of the day with inner awareness of the divine presence and action within us. Wisdom brings ways to enhance awareness of divine presence as we go along our daily path. One of the pillars of Wisdom School is to articulate a rhythm of daily living, taken from one of the oldest traditions in Christianity, the Benedictine rule for monastic life.



The Benedictine rule provides a template for a rhythm of daily life, which follows the ebb and flow of our activities, our prayer, and our relationships. This is symbolized by the cross, which divides our day into four quadrants: praying and working, alone and in community. The center of the cross symbolizes our personal center as well as the center of our day, which is the intersection of the divine and the human in everything we do. In all our activities, we are invited to awaken to the creative connection of infinite and finite, matter and spirit.

The activities of the day are performed in a manner to elicit awareness and presence. The Wisdom School is not a silent retreat exclusively, but we follow the Great Silence from the final prayer of the evening into the next morning's meditation and through breakfast. This reduces chatter and "comparing notes" from the day, which tend to allow the thinking mind to dominate. Throughout the rest of the day, we are led to be aware with our entire being as we learn, work, and relate to each other.

Each morning at the Wisdom School, there is a morning teaching after breakfast on a particular theme. The rhythm of life as described in Benedictine monasticism is a good example. The teaching is done in the wisdom tradition known as 'Sobhet,' which is spoken from the heart and listened to from the heart. There is some information transfer, but it is in the service of awakening the heart.

After the morning teaching, we are led to engage with work. Most will perform some task of manual labor like washing windows, weeding, raking, cleaning, etc. This type of task is well suited to the invitation we are given to become aware of our inner presence while we work. This is facilitated by an inner task, for example, to notice yourself as you work. Perhaps to notice your hands or feet, or your gesturing. The first thing students learn is that, when we engage in chatter with the one next to us, we swiftly lose awareness of our inner presence. This is one of the essential observations of the Wisdom School. The work time is punctuated with reminder stops to return to our inner task.

At midday, lunch is a good time to share observations of the morning activities, and there are several hours of time after lunch for solo work. We are invited to walk along the lake or stream, hike a forest path, or journal, practice lectio divina, etc. This individual work is also an invitation to awaken to the inner divine presence while in nature or in communion with prayer.

Later in the afternoon, communal work of various types is begun with centering prayer as the foundation of inner awareness. Perhaps there is another teaching or group gathering to allow shared awareness of how the wisdom work seems to be developing. We might have a session on chanting, or the Thomas gospel, or body awareness. Often this is more participatory, rather than a large group teaching led only by Cynthia.

In the evening, after dinner, there is another gathering to observe and frame our day. Many participants make observations about how they lost awareness during the day's activities. Much as in the method of centering prayer, thoughts and distractions are

inevitable and part of the human process, but we learn to return to our inner presence in various ways. The day ends with another session of centering prayer, and we go into the Great Silence. So, as you can see, the Wisdom School is not a silent retreat, but is a practice of praying always, centering our awareness, and learning to return to our center as we navigate the day's work.

There is much more to describe than room will permit in a single article. We will look at some of the other aspects of Wisdom School in future newsletters, and attempt to invite you to engage in some of this practice, as well.