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" AND SOUGHT THROUGH PRAYER
AND MEDITATION" --- Bill Wilson**

Most people of a certain age have a solid grasp of at least one level of prayer, namely the sort of thing that Janis Joplin was thinking about when she sang "L-RD, WON'T YOU GIVE ME A MERCEDES-BENZ . . ." Along similar lines, I think that one of the most sincere prayers that drunks and addicts (including me) will ever utter is "DEAR G-D GET ME OUT OF THIS" (sometimes adding that I won't do a), b), or c) anymore; or some positive affirmation to the effect that I will do such and such.)

Now the pros say that there is nothing wrong with this sort of GIMME PRAYER, since all stripes of Christians regularly ask for their "daily bread" and the 12-step people for serenity. There is no systemic difference between this and Janis asking for a "color TV". The pros also say that there is another level of prayer--not necessarily better, not necessarily worse--which they call intercessory prayer. An illustration of this might be "Heavenly Father, let Willie Hadsell, David Board, or 'Farmer Lee' win the lottery." Those who look to The Book of Job for an explanation of why people suffer will find that this man got some relief from his sorrows when he "prayed for his friends". However, close readers of Job will discover that G-d never actually explains to this O-so-patient patient man why he suffers. He just says in substance "Who are you to be asking me questions?" So much for intercessory prayer. The same people say that there is a third level but I'll save that for another day.

My guru William Hogan told me recently that when he was trying to rid himself of some abominable vice [No, not that one!] someone told him "Just sit there and think about nothing for one minute". Hogan quickly realized that he couldn't do it. "How do you think about nothing?", he asked me rhetorically over lunch at the Alpha in Wheeling. Hogan was my last stop on a personal mission to comprehend a phenomenon which the devotees say is not to be thought about. Rather, they say something like "[M]editation entails thinking with the heart not the mind", (which is as clear to me as Wetzel County's Fishing Creek after a three day rain.)

What brought me to the Alpha to sit cross legged (metaphorically) before Hogan was reading in the New Martinsville Methodist church bulletin that a certain clergy person of another denomination (Methodists concentrate on being "nice", something that I have as much trouble with at 78 as I did at 17) right here in Wetzel County was beginning a six weeks course on Christian meditation. My fellow (and, of course, these days, sister) Wetzel Countians are neither devotees of matters avant garde nor are we much given to positive thinking. Therefore I thought this particular person of the cloth should be given as much support as possible. Plus, there was no charge!

I have "piddled" around with meditation for a long time, off and on (mostly off) since I first read J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in the late 50's. I have numerous objections to the practice, both practical and theoretical. Let me dispose of the practical one first. It is my personal and professional opinion [I am taxed by the State now as a "Christian psychoanalyst", which you, my clever readers, will immediately realize is an oxymoron. Ziggy--that's what we insiders call him--was a stone cold atheist whereas Christians of all stripes make at least a passing nod at Le Bon Dieu.] Hogan, my guru, and I had difficulties early on with meditation is that we both suffered from what the behaviorists call ADD-H (we are in translation "hyperactive children"; Hogan has apparently been cured.)

The Famille Rogers was flooded out in 2004 and lived for a year plus in a Fema trailer just south of the Steelton school. I was beset by troubles then not unlike Job (but not of the same magnitude) and since I had given up substance abuse in 1982 I decided to try meditation as a coping mechanism as an alternative to homicide/ suicide so as to relieve a case of existential despair (i.e., more than my usual quantum of self-pity.) I bought a cheap egg timer and put it on the lowest setting, something under three minutes. It probably took a week before I could sit still until the timer went off. And that three minutes was the purest of agony, like being in the dentist's chair for root canal.

When the weather got warmer I would go down the the Court Restaurant for lunch (when I was in my 30s I would go to Los Vegas to watch the show girls, but from my 50s on I just checked out the lovely waitresses at the Court [Actually, I still do.]) After the regulars decamped I would go behind the Courthouse and sit cross legged on the grass and watch the barges on the Ohio River. I left my egg timer up in the trailer and used the Courthouse clock which rings on the half hour. Once, maybe I got a whole hour in. Usually though I quit on the half hour. Attention Deficit Disorder: Hyperactive, Remember?

Of course, this wasn't "real" mediation. Mostly I would sit there with my eyes open and watch the boats come and go (and occasionally think "dirty thoughts" about one of the waitresses.) Although guru Hogan would probably have to say that this qualified as the real thing since, if I understand his teachings correctly, there's really no right or wrong way to meditate. I suppose the only ironclad rule is that you can't talk or go to sleep. You may be able to watch TV though, since I have seen studies to the effect that the brain waves of people watching TV flatten out in exactly the same fashion as do those who just sit and stare at a blank wall (one form of Buddhist meditation, I'm told.)

Over the intervening years, I have sat, e.g. with Buddhists at the Bhavana Society over in the eastern mountains, the "Hairy Critters" at New Vrindaban in Marshall County (this foregoing insult is indigenous West Virginia humor at its best), and the Muslims at the ICP in Pittsburgh. The problem with this is that I have an unfinished "conversation" with the famed theologian Dr. Bonnie Thurston about whether I can be both a Muslim and Methodist at the same time and there is certainly a possibility that she may be right.

For example, when I am with the Bros at the mosque in Pittsburgh (all the Sisters are behind the screen in the back), the thought occasionally strikes me that one (or more) of these Sons of the Prophet might decide to start killing infidels with me !!! Long before the massacre at "The Tree of Life" in Pittsburgh (I have been there), I started attending Friday services at "Temple Shalom" in Wheeling to learn how to pronounce Hebrew when I was in seminary. I found myself thinking what I would say if some neo-Nazi jumped me coming or going: "Hey, lay off buddy! I'm only a philo-Semite. I'm not the real thing."

Meditation like fasting is a discipline that cuts across all spiritualities and both have their cognates in the secular world, e.g. Transcendental Meditation ["TM" is a registered trademark] and "Weight Watchers" [also a business.] So what intrigued me about the prospect of Christian meditation is that with these people we would be "[A]ll with one accord in one place." The Acts of the Apostles, 2:1. Guru Hogan had earlier pointed out to me that he knew of two men who had become "enlightened" (a big deal with meditators), D.T. Suzuki and Thomas Merton, one a Buddhist and the other a Trappist monk. The reason guru Hogan gave for their being "enlightened" was that their peers considered them such. What is interesting about this pair is that they stand at the antipodes of the spiritual world. Basically, Buddhists are atheists and when a Buddhist speaks of Nirvana, he or she is not talking about Heaven or some Happy Hunting Ground. They are talking about extinction, disappearing like soap bubbles or sea foam. Not only do they accept this but they embrace it. "[They] are more brave than me more blond than you." -- e.e. cummings.

Thus to put it baldly, when Suzuki meditates, he sees the BLACK HOLE, what Hemingway prayed to when he would pray "Our nada, who art in nada . . ." And when Merton (who was praised by Pope Francis during his visit to Philadelphia a couple years ago) meditates he sees THE HIGH, HOLY ONE WHO DOTH INHABIT ETERNITY (i.e., G-d, as the Orthodox write it because as Aquinas says the Almighty can only be spoken of allusively [as in "G-d" is like unto, not G-d is]. So how can two people who start at the same place end to at such different destinations?

I dunno. If you see guru Hogan before I do--and Chris Stirewalt who went from Linsly to Fox News told me once that Hogan was a leprechaun: "Did you ever see him enter or leave a room? Never!"--ask him for me, OK? Until I hear from guru Hogan (or you, dear reader) I will follow the suggestion of the man whom I consider the greatest intellect of the past century. He concluded Section I of "Ash Wednesday" with these words: "Teach us to care and not to care/ Teach us to sit still."

The good and bad of Jeff Sessions getting fired

President Donald Trump demanded the resignation of U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, effectively firing him from the position. Sessions had a dismal and destructive track record of supporting prohibitionist policies, draconian border controls and inhumane enforcement tactics, and authoritarian brutality in law enforcement. It's good that he's gone. Sessions will be replaced, however, and his replacement may not be much better.

"The good news is that Sessions will no longer be in a position to enforce his dreadfully wrong ideas about law enforcement and public policy," said Libertarian National Committee Chair Nicholas Sarwark. "Sessions is a die-hard supporter of the destructive war on drugs, which the government has been losing for decades. At a time when more and more states are legalizing medical and recreational use of marijuana, Sessions decided to exert federal control by rescinding the Barack Obama-era Cole Memorandum that had prevented federal prosecution of marijuana offenses in states where marijuana had been legalized."



Jeff Sessions

Sessions built an infamous reputation for his cruel and callous disregard of human life and family unity. "If you smuggle an illegal alien across the border, then we'll prosecute you," Sessions said. "If you're smuggling a child, then we're going to prosecute you, and that child will be separated from you, probably, as required by law. If you don't want your child separated, then don't bring them across the border illegally. It's not our fault that somebody does that." Even the virulently anti-immigration President Trump, on the other hand, decided that it didn't look good to lock parents and children cages, separately.

"Sessions was also wrong in supporting the renewal of Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA)," Sarwark said. "It effectively allows our country's 17 intelligence agencies to spy on American citizens with no Fourth Amendment protections. We're glad to see Sessions go."

It's not yet certain who the permanent replacement for Sessions will be. Ordinarily, the deputy attorney general would take over as acting attorney general. In this case, that would be Rod Rosenstein, who is overseeing Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 elections. Instead, Trump named Matthew Whitaker, who worked for Sessions as his chief of staff. Whitaker is on record for criticizing the scope of the Mueller investigation, saying that it "would raise serious concerns that the special counsel's investigation was a mere witch hunt" if it involves examining the Trump family's finances.

"We don't know whether the special prosecutor will find anything of substance regarding election interference by Russia," Sarwark said. "The investigation, however, should be allowed to run its course and Whitaker should ensure that Mueller is not hindered in carrying out that responsibility. When public officials are accused of abusing their power, they must be held to account."

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