

# RECONNECT

## TOO REACTIVE TO RECEIVE

Two contemporary teachers of contemplative prayer offer us two helpful, but quite different, pictures of what it looks like to pray today. Both pictures will help us consider the influence of thoughts and emotions in our attempts to be present and aware of God.

Martin Laird writes about the movement of our thoughts from reactive mind to receptive mind to the peaceful awareness of God with what he calls luminous mind. Many of us begin praying in a state of reactive mind. When I have been engaged in social media, especially after replying to combative comments, I have very much felt the burden of reactive mind as I process ideas, struggle with anger or disappointment, and analyze my overanalyzing. Laird suggests that reactive mind feels a bit like being trapped in a phone booth with a bee. We feel agitated, fearful, and on high alert, reacting in the moment to the perceived threat before us. Perhaps the good news is that the bee is easily avoided if we know how to depart from the phone booth and disengage from our thoughts. Nevertheless, if we carry social media with us on our smartphones and other devices wherever we go, our reactive minds will have no shortage of material to work with since we have locked ourselves in the reactionary phone booth—and unlike a certain police call box, this booth is not bigger on the inside. We'll remain in the phone booth, swatting furiously and never seeing the emptiness of these thoughts. In relation to the false self, Laird notes that those who leave behind reactive mind are also leaving the thoughts bouncing around that are “generating story upon story to such an extent that we derived a sense of identity from our tightly-wound world of thoughts. Or . . . we derived a sense of identity based on what we thought others must be thinking of us.”<sup>1</sup>

Reactive mind is also restless, fully given over to the compulsions of our image-conscious consumer culture. Laird describes reactive mind as a compulsion to acquire and to make progress toward mastery. “It is . . . shaped by a culture that feeds on compulsion, consumption, conquest, credit, and cash,” he writes. “There is a frightened, defensive quality to reactive mind that is always at the ready. It is second nature to us and supported by a heavy momentum that has been generated by a lifetime of going through life merely reacting to what is going on with us and around us.”<sup>2</sup>

If Laird's bee in the phone booth is too distressing, or if you don't know what a phone booth is (trust me, they were terrible . . . unless you were Superman), perhaps Thomas Keating can help with a different picture that illustrates the challenges of prayer. Keating suggests that our thoughts come to mind like an endless series of boats floating down a stream. We can choose to remain grounded in the present moment, waiting patiently on God as we meditate on Scripture or pray in silence. We can also choose to hop on a boat and take that thought for a ride downstream. Who knows what kind of turbulence awaits us downstream, and surely some thoughts will be less stable than others as the currents swirl and shift.

The spiritual teachers of the church have historically taken steps to minimize their distractions and thoughts. The desert fathers and mothers moved to the wilderness outside Alexandria, Egypt, and the wilderness outside Jerusalem to escape the controversies and concerns of the cities. They practiced simple prayers while working or in larger gatherings. Whether they were hermits or community members who practiced regular solitude, they

welcomed visitors and offered instruction to the area churches drawn from the wisdom they developed from their dedicated time in solitude. Routine time with the clarity of thought that came from being disentangled from the daily stream of thoughts gave them wisdom and clarity that the people of their time highly valued. The more they withdrew from the daily flow of information, the more stability they found.

The anonymous Carthusian writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* offered novices a rather militant approach to distracting thoughts at the outset of his manual for prayer, suggesting that they more or less fight off distracting thoughts with a relentless prayer word. Martin Laird notes that this combative approach may not prove helpful for all people at all times, but it can be especially useful for those starting out spiritual practices and who find themselves immersed in afflictive thoughts. We could say that this is a kind of detoxing process that can become less jarring as we settle into the simplicity of returning to our intention to be present for God and letting thoughts go with a simple prayer word, such as *beloved*.<sup>3</sup>

The ability to access social media, podcasts, news, text messages, games, and articles anytime on our smartphones means that we never have to be alone with our thoughts. We are trained to crave stimulation, the little dopamine hit of affirmation from a notification or new email. There's always a breaking story to consider or a hot take on that story to react against. The more immersed we are in news, social media interactions, and other forms of media on our smartphones that can travel anywhere, the more crammed our minds become. This can make us far more reactive, unaware of the thoughts taking up residence in our minds. As these thoughts accumulate, our ability to sort through them is diminished, and our default can become a kind of reactive stance. Rather than carefully sorting through them and their impact on us, we can fall into a pattern of more or less swatting at a bee or frantically jumping from boat to boat.

At the root here is how technology hinders our freedom to think clearly. While we are free to immerse ourselves in information, somewhere along the way we can lose our self-awareness and grounding. Merton wrote about the impact of this on our spiritual receptivity: "Man cannot assent to a spiritual message as long as his mind and heart are enslaved by automatism. He will always remain so enslaved as long as he is submerged in a mass of other automatons, without individuality and without their rightful integrity as persons."<sup>4</sup>

Losing time for a quiet mind, to say nothing of solitude and silence, makes us more likely to be reactive and unable to process the thoughts in our minds. Our cluttered minds won't have much space left for prayer, meditation on Scripture, or other spiritual practices that could ground us in our true identity in God. In fact, the reactive, overwhelming nature of social media and smartphones doesn't just affect our own inner states. This reactive state also affects how we interact with one another.

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#### Endnotes

1 Martin Laird, *An Ocean of Light: Contemplation, Transformation, and Liberation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 119.

2 *Ibid.*, 62.

3 See Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 19–23.

4 Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 2.