

Enjoy the great indoors: 20 top tips for change amid crisis

Stephen G Wright

From E-Coracle: the journal of the Iona Community.

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In *Wouldn't take nothing for my journey now* Maya Angelou writes: "If you can't change a thing, change the way you think about it." In these times where there is so much suffering and we feel loss and fear as so many of our everyday opportunities are closed to us, we have a choice. We can feel angry, afraid and victimized, or we can take stock, accept what is and see what potential lies in this liminal space of lockdown. We may be living through a tragedy, but it can also be an initiation.

I'm used to supporting others on retreat. It's my job. And I regularly take retreats myself. These are times of solitude for reflection, renewal and possible transformation. Right now, billions of people across the globe are locked down, either solo, or with friends and family. We can use this time to either disintegrate into fear and frustration or invest a lot of energy in just trying to keep things as normal as possible, or embrace it and all that it might have to offer. I've been inundated with requests to know "what can I do to make best use of this time?" If we change the way we think about it, from punishment to potential, then it may be that both we and the world may profit from it, if we use it wisely.

For lots of people it quite understandable that we should keep on keeping on as normal, shoring up our sense of self by filling the space not only with work at home, but with virtual pubs, meetings, gigs, binge watching, catching up with all those long-neglected jobs at home, and countless online groups. It's easy to get overpeopled in ordinary life and it seems we can do just the same virtually when the usual channels of socialising and work are closed to us. It's also quite understandable than when our very sense of self is threatened and we are afraid for our livelihoods and our health, or stuck at home with a challenging relationship or demanding kids, or feeling lonely and cut off, then we should try every means to stick with what we know, keep busy, keep entertained, keep communicating. But maybe there is an alternative for some, if not all, of the time to rethink what we do and try some different approaches.

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this time?" If we change the way we think about it, from punishment to potential, from struggle to opportunity, then it may be that both we and the world may profit from it, if we use it wisely.

While our media is awash with possible options for coping, just 'coping' doesn't interest me. Instead I look for opportunity for change at many levels within this global crisis and how each of us might contribute to that. My suggestions are therefore directed at those who want to find a different and arguably healthier response to what is going on; those for whom the spiritual life is a given, where some notion of the Divine is real, in fact *the Real* according to the great English mystic Evelyn Underhill. Inevitably in my line of work I'm used to hanging out with people committed to the religious and spiritual life, particularly contemplatives, who are going to have a different, not to say unconventional, approach to the current crisis. Those for whom ordinary reality is the only one there is might find my suggestions off the wall. The truth that arises in the spiritual life, not only sets you free, it makes you odd! But maybe one or more of the points that follow can be embraced in our lives, even when we're stuck in the pressures of a pandemic...

So, in no particular order, here are my "Top 20" suggestions:-

1. *Stay in loving awareness.* Below I will look at ways that support us in doing that. It is bringing a quality of equanimity and non-attachment to what is going on and not getting caught up in judgmentalism, anger, blaming and shaming. This can be a tough call when the notion of "love your enemy" includes a lethal virus and an awful lot of pundits and leaders demonstrating astonishing levels of egocentrism, ageism, mendacity and ignorance. Loving awareness helps us to embrace all that is going on with compassion. Instead of judging others (which hurts only ourselves when we think about it) we may see that their foolishness comes from a place of fear, and in doing so that might just open the door to feeling sorry for their predicament (no matter how venal they appear to be) and sorrow may in turn open the door to compassion. We are thus eased away from our own feelings of fear, anger and frustration which only make us feel worse. Being open to loving awareness we stop dumping our fearful anger onto others and we feel better ourselves.
2. *Secure a Holy Hour.* Many a pub (when they used to be open!) has a Happy Hour. Now hold a Holy Hour, at least twice a day, more if you wish; a time of silence devoid of TV, 'phones, social media, conversation

or other demands and distractions. Whether we live alone or with others (in the latter case agree to hold this sacred, silent space at the same time if possible, and even children can respond well to an opportunity to be still), let this be an inner lockdown free from the distractions of the world. The inclination to fill available space can be very strong, often because we can't bear silence and solitude and the way the absence of busyness exposes us to all kind of inner disquiet. But stick with it. Let this be a time free from noise and doing as much as possible. Be wary of the inclination to join every Whatsapp, Facebook, email group or any of the multitude of networks and social groupings on offer. Discern what you really need – sometimes less is more. For lots of people life is proving to be just as busy and crowded virtually as it was ordinarily. We don't have to perpetuate more of the same if we use this time to take stock. Balance the need for connection with the potential of silence and solitude. If possible, we can extend this sacred time even further than holy hour(s) and make whole days holy (the original meaning of holiday) when we purposefully turn away from the inner and outer turmoil to be receptive to silence, depth and the 'still small voice within'.

3. *Minimise news updating.* We are hard-wired for communication, it keeps us aware and safe. We are human belongings not just human beings, we strive relentlessly to stay connected to others. But our inclination to being compulsive communicators can cause us to become dangerously overloaded. Restrict your news check-in to perhaps twice a day and stick to it. The temptation to know "what's going on" can be very strong, but invariably all that means is that we spend a lot of time tapping into personal and collective fear. Fear is as much a virus as Covid-19 and just as dangerous. Lots of studies have shown how we are influenced by the emotions of others. Fear (and the anger which always grows out of it) is no exception and it is unhealthy if sustained. It tends to suppress the immune system, not least at a time when we need it to be fully functional.
4. *Stick with reliable sources of information.* When you do follow local and world events, choose reputable newspapers with good fact-checking journalists, websites of repute such as the WHO, the NHS, The Centre for Disease Control and many university health departments (John Hopkins University has been one I personally turn to). There's an awful lot of disinformation and scaremongering out there – be discerning and restrict the time you give to it.
5. *Loneliness and solitude are not the same.* The latter is a choice in which we may find insight and recuperation. The former is unwanted, in which

we may feel abandoned and unsafe. Many studies have shown how loneliness makes us sick – literally – it exacerbates everything from autoimmune diseases, to cancer, heart diseases and strokes. Be willing to reach out to friends by phone or social media, or whatever works for you, to maintain contacts and help you to feel engaged with the world (while balancing this with Point 2). One of the ways we tend to deal with the pain of loneliness is to keep busy, but keeping busy can be difficult if not impossible when we are largely holed up in our own homes and if we do not fall into the category of “essential” workers. Avoid trying to keep busy; instead reach out to friends, family or neighbours even if its only for a quick chat...they may be struggling just as much as you. If you really hit the wall, don't forget there are all sorts of helplines, not least such as the Samaritans, and in these times there is an army of therapists, counsellors and spiritual directors out there who are ready and willing to be available by phone or video link.

6. *Exercise.* The government has currently suggested we venture outdoors (into public spaces) only once a day. That's much less a problem if we have our own garden, in which case spend as much time in it as possible. If not, take the allocated slot to walk, run, cycle (while keeping the recommended safe 6 feet of social distance). Exercise is essential to mental and physical wellbeing. But further, it's good to spend time in nature as much as we can. It feeds the soul. Many studies have shown how being in nature especially among trees, wildlife and by water has health benefits. That might be everything from being with our pet, to looking after a houseplant to touching a tree in the street. Open the window, let fresh air in, take in the view if there is one, look at the sky, or look at a beautiful view on your TV or computer screen (studies have shown that even in windowless hospital rooms, patients with computer generated views of nature heal faster). Set an indoor exercise plan if getting outdoors is difficult (and currently there's loads of TV fitness instructors on YouTube to get us going! Some of my grandchildren are currently hooked on Joe Wicks, though I'm not sure it's just for the exercise!)
7. *Check out what's going on locally.* There are legions of volunteer groups out there in every community to whom we can reach out and who can help us, for example if we need food. Find out who and where they are and how to contact them if someone hasn't already dropped a note through the letterbox or sent an email. And further, we can look at where we might healthily participate in supporting others within our current

restrictions. Lots of studies have also shown that one thing that helps keeps us healthy is the opportunity to help others. Those 700,000 volunteers who have stepped forward to support the NHS and others in the UK in recent days will paradoxically be helping themselves as much as others. It's important to allow ourselves to receive help, but it is important also to our wellbeing to have opportunities to give it. We can check on vulnerable neighbours by phone or a knock on the door if we know they do not have a phone or are not on-line, while keeping the required distance and sanitising the hands. Even if it's only for a quick chat. And we may have to look out for neighbours in other ways that are more difficult. For example, when people are cooped up for long periods there is greater risk of domestic violence. Do we have to be prepared to act when we are concerned for the wellbeing of a neighbour and overcome our inclination "not to interfere"?

8. *Be careful with the words.* Currently the language around Covid-19 is extremely war-like...some leaders posture as leading us into 'battle', speak of 'winning', 'defeating', 'conquering'; military metaphors abound reinforced by the fact that armies are now being drafted in to help. Words are powerful. They affect our consciousness in all manner of subtle ways and warlike words can stir up deep feelings. This virus is just that, a virus, it's doing what a virus is supposed to be doing. It's not personal. It's not an 'enemy', in the sense that it is sitting in some bunker plotting our downfall. The warlike language does nothing to the virus, but it does stoke up a consciousness of fear and anger with the associated unhealthy consequences (see above) in ourselves. In the UK particularly there's an inclination in some quarters to conjure up the spirit of the 'blitz' to see us through. Again, warlike language is being summoned up even though much historical evidence for a whole nation pulling together as one in WWII is something of an illusion. Crime in wartime went up 57%, and all manner of false claims to cures, internet scams and downright profiteering are happening now. Before the crisis, and with my nursing knowledge of infection control that led me to see what might be coming, I bought a 5 litre bottle of hand sanitiser to equip all the family. A week later the price had gone up from £20 to £90!
9. *Look for the deeper meaning.* We are meaning-seeking animals. Use this time of enforced solitude to become still, quiet and reflective – holy(i)days. We don't need to fill it to keep the heebie-jeebies away, but allow it to be an opportune moment to reflect on life, our values, our priorities. What is it that really matters to us? What is this disconnection

from ordinary life helping us to appreciate? What is it showing us about fear in ourselves and how to overcome it? What is the gift of this time, amid the suffering, that is helping us to see ourselves and values more clearly (and where we have become lost)? When we look for answers to questions we become empowered to make changes. Use this time to see what really counts and to resolve to make the changes that are needed in the future when this crisis is over. Beware of the desire just to 'get back to normal'. Supposing what was normal for us was not quite all it was cracked up to be when we really have chance to think about it? In being busy leading our normal lives, we may be missing so much. In this quiet time, what in life do we need to appreciate more? In this enforced isolation, try sitting meditatively with these four questions about our current situation. I'm using religiously oriented words here (In the Kentigern school for contemplatives here in Cumbria we avoid gendered words for God, favouring 'Beloved', but use what works for you – it might be your Soul, your Highest Self, your Buddha nature, the universe, Jesus, the Way, the Light Within....whatever)

Sit quietly and breathe deeply, be aware of the presence of the Beloved whether near or far, whether felt or imagined and simply ask these questions. Don't dwell on them too much or try to make something happen, or edit it...just let a response gently arise:-

Beloved, in this time of isolation and worldly crisis, what is it You want me to receive?

What is it You want me to know?

What is it You want me to let go of?

What is it You want me to do?

Note your responses to these questions, digest them and discern carefully what they mean to you (for the line between illumination and delusion can be very thin). What are you being offered to help you be different in the world that you might wish to follow up? Maybe start keeping a journal about such inner experiences if you do not already, share them for discernment with a trusted friend, guide or counsellor.

10. *Look to the future.* While we have to live within the restrictions of the moment, spend some time envisioning the future. How do you want it to be (how do you want to be) when this is all over? Will it be 'to get back to

- normal' or have you come to realise that some things in your life or yourself need to change. If so, how will these be pursued?
11. *Look to the suffering of others.* It's not all about us. Pray for them, hold them in your heart for their health and healing and especially support for those bereaved. Many studies have shown that holding the intention for the wellbeing of others, in what has become known as non-local healing, really does affect them physically and psychologically in ways we do not yet fully understand. (In the old days we just called it prayer!) In the current crisis new qualities of grief are having to be coped with when loved ones are not allowed to be physically present with the dying, cannot touch them and say good bye, and rituals and rites of passage like funerals are now severely curtailed. When 'this is over' we may each of us have to be more sensitive to those among us who have not been able to say 'goodbye', how it has impacted on them, and how we might find ways of creating 'farewells' long after a burial or cremation has taken place.
 12. *Give more time to the inner life.* Not just as above where we might revisit our values and what has heart and meaning for us, but also exploring our accepted beliefs and connection or otherwise to the Beloved however we experience this. Does the relationship need to go deeper? What in our religious/spiritual life is ready to be changed? Down the ages people have longed for 'more time' to give to their inner lives, to explore 'God'. Well, for many of us now is the opportunity. Read inspiring literature, watch those videos of great teachers, let the time of silence and stillness be devoted to meditation, prayer or contemplation. We can't take a pilgrimage out there, but there may be nothing to stop us now making that inner pilgrimage. Take this time to remember, re-member i.e. join again, to the Beloved, if you have become disconnected, explore your original intent, which so often gets lost in the busyness of everyday life....Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? How do I get there?
 13. *Learn to meditate.* If you haven't already, this is one of the most powerful spiritual practices we can follow, but it also has many proven health benefits. We all, at least initially, need some kind of 'method' so that our minds don't just bounce around all over the place as we sit there. I'm attaching a simple beginners guide, which we use here at the Foundation. Two free guided meditations will shortly be made available on line and as YouTube downloads (go to www.sacredspace.org.uk) Meditation with a purpose is an oxymoron (for in meditation we seek to be purposeless), so I'm hesitant to suggest 'trying' to meditate in order to

relax (the 'trying' stops us relaxing). Nevertheless the simple tools offered on-line may help the practice and lead us coincidentally into a more relaxed state. Relaxation has the benefit of boosting our immune system.

14. *Take the time to take time.* Our inclination to be relentlessly busy, because we have bills to pay or careers to follow, is understandable. However we sometimes keep busy at least in part because we find being quiet too frightening, or because we are caught up in only valuing ourselves when we are achieving. Even when we have a chance to be still and reflective, those unconscious drives can so easily lead us to fill every moment with all those jobs and household chores we "should" do, books we "should" have read, films we "should" have seen...and before we know it the crisis has passed and all we've done is slipped back into ordinary life and nothing has changed. "Shoulds" make me shudder! They usually impel us to keep to our usual patterns of behaviour to avoid going deep. Allow time to take time – to be still, silent, reflective, listen deeply – see how the silence and stillness might speak to you. And further; the spiritual way teaches us that we are not who we think we are. In these quiet times, we may have a chance to set aside all the busyness that shores up our identification with our roles. Maybe instead of being busy we can be busy with just being? Being - quiet, reflective, open to taking a rain check on who we really are and why we are here – other than the assumptions which govern our everyday lives until now. And further, instead of being busy, be creative. Not as a means of filling the time, but as using time to be fulfilled; an intentional willingness to surrender into the creative process – write, paint, garden, commit to a hobby, anything that opens us to creative self expression. Through this we may find hidden joys and depths. Being creative is a kind of prayer, a relationship between I and not-I where we are lost, out of time and space, for a little while and out of which we may make something beautiful or useful. And out of which we may see more of who we really are and the myriad possibilities of our humanity that stem from that.

15. *Examine the truth of routines and relationships.* Now that we have some enforced time away from people, we can notice what it is that really matters to us, make a note of these – friendly hugs and kisses, a café lunch with a friend, time for relationships, connecting with others and enjoying the simple things of life, the jobs we do. It may mean that we realise we are caught up in some relationships, occupations and groups that are not nurturing to us. Does this mean it is time to change the way we are in them with greater love and authenticity or is it time to let them

go?

16. *Eat and drink well.* Despite all the limitations, now is not a bad time to review how we take care of our bodies. Be careful of the risk of eating too much processed or convenience foods when other more nutritious ones may be less easily available. With the points above about exercise, we might usefully review the foods we eat, the drinks we consume. Is this a time to gently make some changes that would nurture the body as well as the soul?
17. *Don't be afraid.* In the four Gospels, Jesus tells us not to worry or fear more times than anything else (even instructions to love) – and I'm happy to let anyone who wants them have my summary of the relevant Biblical quotes. Fear does not respond well to reason. We can tell ourselves that realistically and statistically this virus is not going to kill us, yet still it is scary and as suggested above, fear is also contagious when we read, see and hear what others fearfully report. Beware of hanging out too much with fearful people. Meditate or practice moving meditations like Tai Chi and Yoga as they can help dissipate fear (lots of media videos are available if we don't already practise these). If you get fearful, try these:-

i]. Sit quietly and notice the fear rising in yourself. Don't fight it or try to ignore it or tell yourself that you are stupid for being fearful. Just let it be. Notice that it is there. It is normal to be afraid in these circumstances. Now bring your attention to your breathing. You can try what is known as 7/11 breathing. Breathe in and count for 7 seconds then count 11 seconds as you breathe out. Slowing your breathing and paying attention to it in this way can help you relax.

And/or:-

ii] As you breathe in think of places, people even pets that you love, and the love of the Beloved. Allow yourself to visualise, feel and be reminded of that love with each in breath. As you breathe out allow that same loving awareness and appreciation of this love to be breathed back to them. Just sit with this visualising and breathing for about 20 minutes each day and especially when you are fearful.

Those for whom the Real is real, there is of course, a powerful

reassurance. Perhaps we find that our trust in the Beloved strengthens us. That we can truly find the Beloved in all things, even what we think of as the shadow times and experiences. We are not alone. Letting go of fear helps us to trust and, in the words of Mother Julian, remind ourselves that this is only one plane of reality playing itself out and that ultimately "All shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."

18. *Seek the grace.* As I drove home this morning, the traffic was hugely reduced. I noticed in this rural areas that suddenly there was much less road kill. I live under the flight path from England to North America, yet today the sky is silent, bereft of jet trails. There is evidence of pollution levels falling, burglaries in decline, less street violence now the pubs are empty. We normally live in a fast paced world where everything seems to be done at speed, from travel to relationships, from work to communications, from eating to resting. It can be useful to consider the graces in all this suffering – the ways that life has got better for the world and ourselves. It might be a good idea to journal about them, make a list of the gifts and not just the losses. How might appreciation of these strengthen our commitment to changes in our lives in the future, not just for ourselves, but also the lives of others and the life of the world?
19. *Remember the good that is deeper than all that is wrong.* In these times of crisis, we may be inundated with news of those who are behaving badly – those taking advantage of the situation to profiteer or commit cybercrime or cheat on their neighbours or engage in hoarding. We can get a very distorted view of humanity if we dwell on these. Remember the millions of volunteers at work across the country helping the NHS and looking out for neighbours. Consider the millions putting themselves at risk in our health and social services, those maintaining essential services in transport, shops, police and fire stations. Think of the kindness of strangers and the friend taking the trouble to call us and offer help or consolation. As we say in the Iona liturgy, it is important to recall the "good that is planted more deeply than all that is wrong". We do well to dwell on this truth and not allow a few bad eggs to distort our view of the wonder of humanity and all the potential we have to be in right relationship with the world, ourselves and that which is beyond the self.
20. *Reappraise our part in the world.* So much of the way we see the world is anthropocentric. It's as if everyone one of us is making a film and the film has our name as its title. It is a good idea to step off our human-defined stage and spend time in nature, look at the skies and the stars and the clouds, and realise that the season is unfolding around us like it always

has. New life is emerging (or for southern hemisphere readers, moving into a time of rest). Humanity for a long time has placed ourselves at the centre of creation. The present crisis is in no small part due to the human folly that ensues from that point of view, not least an opportunistic virus finding its way to us through the circumstances we created for it. Many religious traditions recognise that we are part of all-that-is; other parts continue with or without us. In being part, then all life is our neighbour and Jesus was very clear about how we should relate to our neighbours. Honouring and respecting life, rather than relentlessly exploiting and dominating it, might be something we could usefully embrace. The cultivation of greater humility might be good for us and the rest of the world, both now and when the pandemic has passed.

This time of crisis is not all shadow and suffering. The Chinese symbol for change contains two elements, suggesting both threat and opportunity. If we embrace these times with a healthy consciousness of opportunity and not just threat, then we may indeed see significant changes in ourselves and the world when the crisis has passed. I suspect that in a few months' time we'll see a spike in job changes because the solo time made us realise we needed to find something more meaningful for us, divorces and separations may well go up, and huge numbers of people may be seeking help with stress induced mental and physical illness. And we may well find in nine months time the NHS will be crying out for midwives!

Look also at the way we have had to deal with the pandemic - coming together - whether it be standing outside and joining a mass applauding of the NHS, the infinite connections taking place on the internet, the massive wave of volunteering or the collective organising of supply chains. Perhaps all this may aid an equally collective shift of consciousness about the way we organise our lives as a society. If we can commandeer hotels in "wartime" for the homeless, then why not always? If we can collectively support the NHS to give it all it needs in "wartime", then why not always? If we can recognise that borders are pointless when it comes to stopping suffering, then why not always? If we actually can do a lot of work from home and avoid hours spent commuting, then why not always? If supermarkets can set aside supplies for those in need, then why not always? These and many more questions can now be asked, and answered. Will we drift back to more of the same, or is there an opportunity even amid much suffering for both personal and collective transformation?

About three billion or more people across the globe are in some form of lockdown as I write. Even if only a small percentage, say 10%, resolve to reflect and change in this time, then that's 30 million change agents unleashed in the world. "Let us rejoice and be glad of it."

Stephen G Wright 2020

For more information on the spiritual practices mentioned above see the other works by the author:-

Coming Home. SSP. Penrith

Contemplation. SSP. Penrith

Kentigern – a life and a Lakeland pilgrimage. Wild Goose. Glasgow

See also www.sacredspace.org.uk for two free guided meditations and/or contact admin@sacredspace.org.uk for more information and details of forthcoming YouTube videos.

Appendix: Notes on meditation

These notes accompany guidance on the CD "Introduction to Meditation"; obtainable from www.sacredspace.org.uk

1. Find a quiet place where you can be free from interruptions. Make sure you have the time set aside just to devote to practice. Some people get concerned that they may fall into a relaxed state and fall asleep or not "come back" in time for an appointment. It is surprising how quickly our own body clock seems to take over reliably. Nevertheless, make the session as free as possible from the feeling of being "timetabled". Adjust the setting so that it is as pleasant as you wish; if it's your own room – light a candle, dim the lights, add flowers and so on to create an environment that is aesthetically pleasing to you and in which you might include religious rituals, symbols and scripture that are important to you. If possible, perhaps you can set aside a special place and/or time at home or work that is just dedicated to silence and stillness. If outdoors, find a pleasant place in nature, by a tree, a garden etc. – whatever pleases you. With practice you may find that these requirements pass away and you will be able to meditate anywhere. In the meantime, the way we prepare ourselves – going to a particular place, meeting certain people, reading inspirational words, lighting a candle and so on can all be part of your conscious "pilgrimage", the steps along the way as you shift your consciousness and intention to being committed to resting in your deepest self.

2. Get comfortable in a chair, on a cushion or meditation stool – avoid lying down as you may just fall asleep. Sit and check your body posture for comfort, close your eyes (see also 3 below) and check your body from head to toe that it feels relaxed and that you are not tense or holding yourself anywhere. If necessary, move, tighten and relax the muscles. For the meditator, no special posture is needed other than that which allows both comfort and attention. You do not have to cross your legs in the lotus position, prostrate yourself, kneel down or adopt any other position for that matter. You can do so if you wish, if you find such positioning conducive, but there is no requirement. Just allow yourself to be comfortable. Personally I find that sitting cross legged on the floor with good back support is all that is needed, or in a chair following the "90 degrees" rule – the head, neck and spine upright and in alignment but gently and not rigidly so, and, with the bottom in the seat corner, making a 90 deg. angle with the thighs. The knees bent to make an angle of about 90 deg. with thighs and lower legs, then the feet flat on the floor at 90 deg. to the legs.

The arms rest by the sides with the palms of the hands resting on the knees or facing upwards.

3. Then, keeping your eyes closed or with gaze resting, bring your attention to the place in which you sit - feel the air temperature, listen to the background sounds, notice what you smell. Just become aware of your environment. If you are not comfortable sitting with your eyes closed then leave them open but focus on a nearby object, say a candle, in front of you. Let your gaze stay with that for a little while or simply look downwards, then let your gaze go out of focus.

4. Now bring your attention back into your body, check comfort once more. Feel yourself just sitting there, the position of your body, the solidness of it in the chair or on a cushion, the ground beneath you and the contact of clothing with skin; very safe and solid and present in the world.

5. Gradually, as you sit there, bring your attention from your body and into your normal breathing for a minute or two. Feel the breath coming and going through mouth and nose, the rise and fall of chest and abdomen. Take a couple of deep breaths and then relax into normal breathing.

6. Now count the out-breaths, one to four as you breathe out. Just keep doing this for as long as you wish. When you have counted four breaths, go back and count again – repeat the cycle continuously.

7. Notice distracting thoughts – and as soon as you do, gently bring yourself back to counting. Know that all you have to do is count and breathe. Just sit and allow yourself to relax into it, watching your thoughts come and go, and the tricks of the mind to trying to pull you away, such as setting strict goals and expectations of what you want to happen. These can be counterproductive – your desire for things to happen or not happen gets in the way of them happening! So, just learn to relax and sit – and let the rest take its course. Don't try and force out distractions – they only get stronger if you do. As soon as you become aware that your attention has drifted, gently ease yourself back to counting, just prefer it and don't force it – this is gentle attention not concentration with effort. Watch out for all those punishing thoughts "I'm no good at it", "I keep forgetting", "It's boring" etc. etc. These are just thoughts like any other; they have no power of their own except what you choose to give them. As soon as you notice you are distracted, gently ease yourself back into attention upon breathing and counting. Sometimes the distractions can be so strong, perhaps even frightening or disturbing, again don't fight them, let them be even facing your fear as you do so. Even tough thoughts are teachers – let them wash

over you, what are they teaching you about acceptance, about humility that you cannot control them, about the need for help? Know that as you do so they will pass, just keep easing yourself back to your prayer words, your *mantra*. No matter how interesting or challenging the thoughts let them go and come back to counting. In time you will find that you are distracted less and less, and you come to simply sit at ease more and more, just "aware". If you notice distractions in the room or beyond, as before, do not try to force them out, just absorb them with ease, make them part of the sitting. Forcing only makes them more irritating. Feeling sleepy? Most people do when they begin – there is no complex spiritual reason for this and you are not "no good at it" - you are simply tired! Use this information – do you need to have a nap? If so, do so and then come back to the practice afterwards. Perhaps you need to re-think your sleep and work patterns to promote more rest and/or look at sitting at times of day when you feel more refreshed and awake (e.g. first thing in the morning). Counting the breath is but one way of providing something on which our attention can settle i.e. if the mind wants to be busy then give it something to think about! It can be especially effective to align the breathing with a word or phrase; a *mantra* or prayer words. The second meditation on the CD is an example of this. You may find that you have one which you use regularly like "Peace, be with me", "I Am loving awareness" or "Be still" or any other "prayer" word or phrase which you may find helpful and in the case of the Kentigern School, the anchoring prayer/*mantra* is "Thy will be done". If you wish you can bypass the counting method and just simply begin and end your stillness/quiet time with the use of your "prayer" words. After developing these practices we may find our meditation moves to a different level as outlined in *Contemplation* – just sitting and aware.

8. Another useful meditative practice is a set of four questions. These can be used whenever you are readying for the day or before any encounter or experience when you are seeking inner guidance of the Beloved. Allow yourself to continue sitting quietly and be receptive to the Presence, however felt, near or far, at that moment. Bring in the first question..."As I start the day/ prepare to meet/ ready myself to...etc. etc...What is it You want me to receive? Sit with the question, don't try to edit any response you see, think, feel, hear or imagine...just accept it as it arises. If 'nothing' is happening accept that too...sometimes nothing is a teacher. Then let the answer to that question go to the back of your mind and rest there, take a deep breath to create a space, let the first question go, then ask the next question. Repeat this with each of three more questions, which after the first are "What do You want me to know?" "What do You want me to let go of?" "What do You want me to do?" Notice whatever arises, make notes

afterwards in your journal and spend some time in discernment, perhaps with a Soul Friend, if you want further clarity.

9. As you feel ready to finish, let go of the counting/prayer words/questions and pay attention to your normal breathing for a moment. Just sit for a little while more and allow yourself to experience the stillness and sense of just being aware and in the moment. Take a deep breath again and as you breathe out this time bring your attention back into your body; feel yourself sitting on the chair, your feet on the ground, the contact of clothing with skin, the body very solid and present in the world.

10. Take a deep breath once more and this time bring your attention from your body back into your environment but keep your eyes closed; feel, listen to and smell the place you are in once more. Then breathe deeply again and this time, as you breathe out, slowly open your eyes or become aware of your gaze, looking downwards first. Move gently and come back into the world – take your time. Rest or sleep more if you need to.

11. Regardless of whether you develop this practice, for example as a root of contemplative prayer, or as an end in itself, regular attention will bring many health benefits. I recommend doing this at least once or twice a day, more if you can and for as long as you can, at least 5 minutes – even a little is better than none at all. Start off with short episodes first so you do not make it too difficult for yourself. Setting yourself up to be perfect just disappoints and demotivates if you don't achieve a "goal". For some people the experience of relaxation is enough, others may wish to deepen it as part of spiritual practice. After a while you may build up to perhaps an hour a day or longer. You can use this simple technique at any time during the day if you need a break or feel stressed. Use the breath, especially deep breaths, to calm you if you feel you are becoming tense but aren't in a place where you can withdraw for a moment. You'll be surprised at how you can seemingly carry on normal conversation and no one notices that your attention has also moved to your breathing and a sense of inner stillness and awareness at the same time.

12. Remember that there are many other approaches to stillness-relaxation-meditation, so you might also look at those involving body work/movement such as yoga, tai chi, walking, running etc.

13. Learning meditation does not have to be a solitary pursuit. In fact there is strength in working with others and getting support and guidance especially when challenges arise. Look to joining a support group such as a local meditation group according to your beliefs. Also seek out the

guidance of a good teacher, mentor, counsellor or spiritual director (see *Coming Home*¹ for guidance on choosing a 'soul community' and 'soul friend').

14. Meditation and prayer need to be seen in the context of everything else that is going on in your life. How do you feel supported or otherwise in your in personal and work life; how do you take care of yourself? There's abundant advice available on stress reduction and self care that can be followed at many levels (see the texts below for further suggestions). Apart from meditation, look at how you might bring into your life (if you haven't already) improvements in diet, sleep pattern, daily quiet time at home, monthly "me" day, finding someone with whom you can talk over problems, and keeping clear boundaries between the various demands in your life.

(Notes taken from the original in *Contemplation*²)

See also www.sacredspace.org.uk for two free guided meditations using the breath and 'peace be with me', or contact admin@sacredspace.org.uk for more information and details of forthcoming YouTube videos.

¹ Wright S G 2017 *Coming Home*. SSF. Penrith

² Wright S 2017 *Contemplation*. SSF. Penrith