

**Meditation on Meditations
Don Thompson**

**Sabbatical Presentation
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In a career lasting more than seventy years Michelangelo reigned supreme in every art: sculpture, painting, architecture, drawing, poetry. So absolute was his mastery, and so Olympian were his creations, that he seemed more than mortal to his contemporaries. They called him “divine,” said his works were the most sublime ever made, even greater than those of antiquity, and used a new term, *terribilità*, to describe the awesome majesty of his art.

I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.

The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.

Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.

The true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection.

Genius is eternal patience.

Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish.

Michelangelo’s art was often driven by the desire to escape the mundane, physical, corrupt, and sinful world. He burned with intense passion for the beauty of the human body and face, but he hoped that this ardor would transport him to another realm, one of ideal form and deathless purity, above and beyond the earthly. The incarnate moved him to aspire to the uncarinate, the immortal, the eternal, the fantastical, the impossible: unbodied beauty. He

felt enchained and trapped—by his work, by his patrons, by his family, by his lust for beauty, by his sinfulness, by his body, by the limits of the actual—and longed to be carried away in ecstasy and rapture.

This is especially clear in one of his intensely poignant sonnets. “The alluring fantasies of the world,” it begins, “have robbed from me the time allotted for contemplating God.” The poem ends, “Make me hate all that the world values, and all its beauties I honor and adore, so that before death I grasp eternal life.”

These insights about Michelangelo form, in part, my reason for spending sabbatical days and nights writing a book of meditations. To help students and others learn how to contemplate God.

Here is an example:

(cleansing breath demo, carotid artery check)

St. Ignatius of Loyola advised his disciples to begin each day in confession, in admission to and agreement with God of spiritual errors. It clears the air of guilt and starts each day anew. He recommended a gesture where we place our right hand on our chest as an act of humility. I invite you to do the following right here, right now. Close your eyes and relax your breathing.

- 1. First, place your right hand on your breast, fingers spread, covering the middle of your chest. This gesture of humility is a bodily posture of prayer and worship. It as if you are catching your breath in awe and fear. As you place your hand across your breast, say “forgive me”, letting the gesture acknowledge that there are areas of your life that are out of balance. Silently, say “I repent” or “I confess”. Ask God’s forgiveness, naming the things you need forgiven. Ask Him to forgive you, to help you get**

past this. This is all done silently, privately. No one but God knows what you mean by this gesture or what you are saying/thinking silently.

- 2. Next, take note of your beating heart by feeling your pulse on your carotid artery on your neck. Do this by placing your thumb and middle finger on either side of your throat, touching your carotid artery a few inches above the top of your rib cage. Notice the feeling of the pulse as blood rushes in and out. Your heart does not stop. It involuntarily and continuously pumps blood through your body, past your lungs, to your extremities. Each artery, vein and blood vessel participates. It is a vivid reminder that your body, created by God, keeps humming, day and night. Focus your attention completely on your blood, your heart. In so doing, you have moved a tiny but powerful and palpable distance toward the freedom of meditation. By getting in touch with your own body, you are freeing your mind in prayer.**

- 3. Short passages of scripture can add a kind of spiritual rhythm to your pulse. Choose one of the following passages and repeat it privately, placing one to two words on each heartbeat.**

Do not fear, just believe/Father forgive me/You are my beloved/WITH ALL MY HEART/I can do all things/The LORD is my shepherd/ The LORD restores my soul/Blessed are the pure in heart/Kyrie Eleison

Do this until the words become part of you, even to the point where the words simply melt into your ever-repeating body rhythm. Keep this up for a minute or so and then choose a briefer version of your passage - perhaps one or at most two words. Let these words form your pulse metronome, repeating the word(s) with each heartbeat. Keep this up for a few minutes. Now rest

and let your pulse do its quiet work. Simply return to a peaceful awareness of your heart beating. This should bring a great calmness and serenity.

- 4. Now place both hands on your chest, one on your breast, the other covering the first, but with its fingers on the carotid artery. You might even bow your head at this point, as though acknowledging your obedience to God. Repeat the words from the previous step as you maintain the rhythm and cycle of your pulse. Imagine that the second hand, the one on top, is Jesus' hand holding you, rebalancing you, realigning you, protecting you, loving you. It is God reminding you: I am here with you. Let's work together. Let's be together. Jesus used touch when he healed the blind, deaf, mute, crippled, and the dead. He placed his hands on their eyes, hands, heart, and ears. Jesus' hand on ours is a reminder of His abiding and constant presence. With our hand, we are saying - i am sorry. Please forgive me. Jesus' hand says: I forgive you.**
- 5. Finally, close with your personal prayer of thanks. Thank God for listening and forgiving. At some point tomorrow or the next day - pause and privately place your hands on your breast, feel your pulse, and imagine that it is god's hand on your hand, comforting, forgiving and reassuring. Thank God for that.**

I began to teach in the Great Books Program in 1994. In the four courses that form this program, we read, discuss, and learn from the complete classic works of such authors as Plato, Aristotle, Homer, Euripides, Virgil, Augustine, Dante, Boethius, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Luther, Descartes, Milton, Rousseau, Kant, Dickinson, Austen, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Darwin, and James. Each class consists of fifteen 18-20 year old college students who are eager to learn from the words of each teacher we read. It is a transformative intellectual and spiritual experience that helps students develop a

courage to take on great literature and philosophy as well as help them become independent thinkers and writers.

Shortly after I started to teach these courses, I happened upon the writing of several spiritual masters, including Richard Rohr, Anthony de Mello, Thomas Merton, and Jean Pierre de Caussade. I learned that prayer and meditation work well together, both requiring practice and daily use. Accordingly, this book is a sampling of the meditation exercises that I have done with my Great Books students over the last 24 years. What began as an experiment of including an occasional 10-12 minute meditation exercise has now blossomed into a weekly fixture of each course. Students love it. This book is comprised of a collection of some of the meditations I have developed and used with my own students. Moreover, it is for anyone who is interested in a deeper Christian spiritual journey.

Our inattention to spiritual exercise and infrequent work at deepening our prayerful conversations with God's abiding presence is a kind of friction or resistance that comes from our busy schedules and our not knowing how to meaningfully practice simple meditations. This book will help smooth and erase this friction. Accordingly, one of the best ways to enter a deep connection to God through meditation is to learn how to direct one's attention away from the mind and toward the senses, using scripture to guide the steps. This provides an entrance to the space and time-frame where God resides, where He waits for our spirit to join Him. The goal of these exercises is to remove all forms of friction or resistance to meditation that the mind uses to prevent our connection to God. Our goal is to arrive in a kind of frictionless state of being in union with God's Spirit. We seek spiritual refreshment, renewal, therapy, and release. To do this, we will continually return to our senses. In effect, we are spiritually coming to our senses, which serve as portals to our bodies, our emotions, and ultimately our soul.

My book contains twenty five meditation exercises, divided into four sections. Each section is tied to one of the four seasons and a corresponding compass point, as inspired by the Lakota Sioux Sweat Lodge Experience.

The first section focuses on meditations that invite us to sense the ways that God draws us to Him. In effect, His magnetism and gravitational pull attracts and invites us to turn our attention to Him. The scriptures provide many examples of how God does this, and these meditations will focus on some of those passages.

The second section is about the time that God occupies and invites us to join. In particular, these meditations focus on helping us let go of the resistance that our minds provide to entering God's time. For this series, we draw from the spiritual inspiration of Jean Pierre de Caussade, showing how time is a kind of sacrament, as well as the physics imagination and insights of Albert Einstein on the how time is sensed relatively. Our goal here is to experience a kind of absolute time where God lives in past, present, and future in one instant. In effect, we meditate on the sacrament of time itself as provided by God's timeless nature.

The third section shifts our focus away from time toward space. Where is God? What does it mean to reside in his place, his temple? These meditations explore the ways that God's being is in all places, ranging from the heavens to the surface of our skin. Here we rely on works by Gaston Bachelard and Juhani Pallasmaa in order to see where the sources of friction in our space experiences are keeping us a distance from the space of God.

The fourth and final section brings us to a series of meditations that allow us to be in both time and space with God. This meditation cycle requires that we focus especially on our sensation of touch as well as the

complete family of senses that present images and perceptions to body and mind. For this section, we rely on the insights about our sensory system that have been noted by Albert Soesman.

Here is a closing meditation - focusing on the sanctity of space:

The Pool at Bethesda

From John 5. After this, there was a Jewish religious feast, and Jesus went to Jerusalem. There is in Jerusalem, by the Sheep Gate, a pool with five porches. In the Hebrew language it is called Bethesda. A large crowd of sick people were lying on the porches-the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed . . . (They were waiting for the water to move; for every now and then an angel of the Lord went down into the pool and stirred up the water. The first sick person to go down into the pool after the water was stirred up was made well from whatever disease he had.)

A man was there who had been sick for thirty-eight years. Jesus saw him lying there, and he knew that the man had been sick for such a long time; so he said to him, "Do you want to get well?" The sick man answered, "Sir, I don't have anybody here to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am trying to get in, somebody else gets there first." Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your mat, and walk." Immediately the man got well; he picked up his mat, and walked.

Quiet yourself for a while now, as a preparation for the contemplation, through doing one of the awareness exercises . . . Now imagine the pool called Bethesda . . . the five porches . . . the pool . . . the surroundings . . . Take time out to imagine the whole setting as vividly as possible, to compose yourself seeing the place . . . What kind of place is it? Clean or dirty? Large or small? Notice the architecture . . . Notice the weather . Having prepared the stage, let the whole scene come to life now. See the people near the pool . . . How many people are there? . . . What sort of people? . . . How are they dressed? . . . What

are they doing? . . . What kind of illnesses are they suffering from? . . . What are they saying? . . . What are they doing? . . . It is not enough for you to observe the whole scene from the outside, as if it were a movie on the screen. You must participate in it . . . What are you doing there? . . . Why have you come to this place? . . . What are your feelings as you survey the scene and watch these people? . . . What are you doing? . . . Do you speak to anyone? . . . To whom? . . .

Now notice the sick man whom the gospel passage speaks about . . . Where in the crowd is he? . . . How is he dressed? . . . Is there anyone with him? . . . Walk up to him and speak with him . . . What do you say to him, or what do you ask him? . . . What does he say in reply? . . . Spend some time getting as many details of his life and his person as possible . . . What sort of an impression does he make on you? . . . What are your feelings while you converse with him? . . .

As you are speaking with him you notice, out of the corner of your eye, that Jesus has entered this place . . . Watch all his actions and movements . . . Where does he go? How does he act? . . . What do you think he is feeling? . . . He is now coming toward you and the sick man . . . What are you feeling now? . . . You step aside when you realize that he wants to talk to the sick man . . . What is Jesus saying to the man? . . . What does the man answer? . . . Listen to the whole dialogue-fill in the sketchy account of the gospel . . . Dwell especially on Jesus's question, "Do you want to get well?" . . . Now listen to Jesus's command as he tells the man to get up and walk . . . the first reaction of the man . . . his attempt to get up . . . the miracle! Notice the reactions of the man . . . notice Jesus's reactions . . . and your own . . . Jesus now turns to you . . . He engages you in conversation . . . Talk to him about the miracle that has just taken place . . . Is there any sickness that you are suffering from? . . . Physical, emotional, spiritual? . . . Speak to Jesus about it . . . What does Jesus have to say? . . . Listen to his words to you,

"Do you want to get well?" Do you really mean what you say when you ask to be cured? . . . Are you ready to take all the consequences of a cure? . . . You have now arrived at a moment of grace . . .

Do you have the faith that Jesus can cure you and that he means to cure you? . . . Do you have the trust that this will happen as a result of the faith of the whole group here? . . . Then listen to his mighty words as he pronounces the words of healing over you or lays his hands on you . . . What are you feeling? . . . Are you certain that those words you have heard are going to have an effect on you, in fact have already had their effect on you even though you may perceive nothing tangible at the moment? Spend a while now in quiet prayer in the company of Jesus.