THE ACTIVE LIFE

WISDOM FOR WORK, CREATIVITY, [illegible]RING

PARKER J. PALMER

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Wisdom for Work, Creativity, and Caring

Parker J. Palmer

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Preface

This book is about the activities that help to make us human —work, creativity, and caring—and I hope that the book itself bears evidence of them. Much work went into the writing, and much care. Whether the outcome is creative, others will have to say, but I know that the process of writing has been creative for me. It has helped renew my soul.

Many people have been integral to the creation of this book, whether they read the manuscript or not, and I want to thank them. They include Ed Beers, Sharon Craven, Susan Davis, Charlie Glasser, Robert W. Lynn, John Mogabgab, Henri Nouwen, Lewy Olfson, Max and LaVerne Palmer, Sally Palmer, Bob and Martha Rankin, Sharon Wallin, and Barbara Wheeler. I am grateful also to John Shopp, my editor, and to the Lilly Endowment, Inc., for support that helped this book along.

Six of the book's eight chapters revolve around stories and poems of the active life that I use in classes and retreats, and I want to thank the hundreds of people who have shared their lives and insights with me in those circles of teaching and learning. My teaching method is simple: I put one of these texts before the group, ask question after question about it, and as I listen the students become my teachers. There are many places in these pages where the voice of original insight belongs to one of these teacher-students. Because my memory fails me, I cannot give them the footnotes they deserve, but they have my gratitude for helping to make this book possible.

I am writing this preface at Las Palomas de Taos, an educational center in northern New Mexico. I arrived here on Good Friday and tomorrow is Easter. Looking out the win-

dows above my writing table, I can see the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Their peaks are deep in snow, their slopes covered with evergreens, the desert at their feet spiked and parched.

These images seem more than enough to me—images of winter and of spring, of aridity and of living water, of death and of life made new. They are more than enough to convey what my words in this book want to say—though the saying is less than the seeing, and the seeing is less than the being.

Las Palomas de Taos
Taos, New Mexico

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1. Spirituality in Action: On Being Fully Alive

I. IMAGES OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

This book—this exploration of work, creativity, and caring in the world of action—is the result of my long journey toward the knowledge that I am not a monk.

My friends do not think that this is an especially deep insight, even if it did take me some years to reach it. After all, they remind me, I am not exactly silent, solitary, celibate, or orthodox, as a monk is supposed to be. I am the father of three, an activist in education and social change, a fellow traveler with the Quakers, a person of more extroversion and ego than a monk is meant to have. What made me think that I might be a monk of some sort, much less spend years learning that I am not? And what have I discovered about my calling to the active life in that process?

If those questions were only about me, I would not raise them here. But though my journey is unique in its details, the issues it has forced upon me are not mine alone.

Many people have been touched by the spiritual renaissance of the last thirty years, and that renaissance—from Thomas Merton onward—has been profoundly shaped by monastic metaphors and practices: silence, solitude, contemplation, centeredness. This spirituality, drawn from the richness of monastic tradition, offers a hope of peace to many people who must live in the harried world of action. Most of these people have never imagined moving to a monastery, but they would like to become more monklike, more contemplative, in the midst of their active lives.

Monastic spirituality has been a gift to many people, in-

cluding me. But the fit between the monastic vision and life in the world of action is not always good. People who try to live by monastic norms sometimes fall so short ("I just can't find an hour a day to meditate") that they end up feeling guilty about leading "unspiritual" lives. People caught in the gap between monastic values and the demands of active life sometimes simply abandon the spiritual quest. And people who follow a spirituality that does not always respect the energies of action are sometimes led into passivity and withdrawal, into a diminishment of their own spirits.

In the spiritual literature of our time, it is not difficult to find the world of action portrayed as an arena of ego and power, while the world of contemplation is pictured as a realm of light and grace. I have often read, for example, that the treasure of "true self" can be found as we draw back from active life and enter into contemplative prayer. Less often have I read that this treasure can be found in our struggles to work, create, and care in the world of action.

Contemporary images of what it means to be spiritual tend to value the inward search over the outward act, silence over sound, solitude over interaction, centeredness and quietude and balance over engagement and animation and struggle. If one is called to monastic life, those images can be empowering. But if one is called to the world of action, the same images can disenfranchise the soul, for they tend to devalue the energies of active life rather than encourage us to move with those energies toward wholeness.

I want to share something of my journey among those images and realities because I know there are others walking a similar path.

II. JOURNEY OF A SOUL

I grew up in a Protestant family in a secular society and received a secular-Protestant education. I was prepared to take my place in the world of action, and I did—as citizen, parent,

writer, teacher, administrator, community organizer. But somewhere along the line I began to fear that world, with its demands, its assaults on my sense of competence and self-worth, its threats of failure. As the meaning of my active life became more ambiguous, I embarked on a spiritual journey, a journey (as I saw it then) away from the world of action into the world of contemplation, away from the challenges of doing into the comforts of being. As a person who came to young adulthood in the sixties, I was supported in my quest by a counterculture whose slogans included "Don't just do something—stand there!"

Of course, I had to keep "doing" in order to stay alive, a task with many levels. So I was fortunate to find guidance far wiser than slogans in the writings of Thomas Merton. As a young man, Merton was filled with the energies of active life, and he lived them to the hilt, sometimes doing harm to himself and others. Fearing his own destructiveness, and guided (as he felt) by God toward spiritual discipline and celebration, Merton entered the Trappist monastery when he was nearly twenty-seven. He spent the next twenty-seven years exploring the monastic experience and metaphor in writings that have made a huge impact on the modern religious imagination. Largely because of Merton and his interpreters, the image of the monk has become a public counterweight to the gravitational pull of our activist age.

In my case, the image had such power that I not only thought about it and wrote about it but needed to act it out as well. Several years ago, I joined with seven other people, including two experienced monks, to develop a new form of monastic community that was to be ecumenical and open to men and women, whether celibate or not—a community not walled off from the world but still governed by monastic norms. Today that community continues. But after nearly three years, my share in it ended in the conclusion that I am not a monk but an activist.

I do not thrive on the monastic virtues of stability, cen-

teredness, balance. As much as I may need those qualities in my life, the words do not name those moments when I feel most alive and most able to share life with others. I thrive on the vitality and variety of the world of action. I value spontaneity more than predictability, exuberance more than order, inner freedom more than the authority of tradition, the challenge of dialogue more than the guidance of a rule, eccentricity more than staying on dead center.

Of course, those pairs are not polar opposites, either/or choices. They are paradoxes, and I need to live in the creative tensions between their various poles. But the truth is that my activist soul is enlivened by moving closer to the pole that contemplative spirituality sometimes devalues or even denies. Perhaps my attempt to move the other way was driven less by a sense of vocation than by a fear of my own energies, by a desire to suppress them. Though I need to avoid the frenzy and violence that always lurk in the active life, I need even more to embrace my God-given powers and gifts. I need to fathom the spirit and truth of the active life.

As I reflect on the limits of monastic spirituality in my own life, I return to Thomas Merton not with a jaundiced eye but with renewed appreciation. It now seems to me that the remarkable thing about Merton was not only that he had the wisdom to choose monastic life as a containment against self-destruction, but that he had the heart to nurture his activist energies in an environment sometimes bent on suppressing them. The very qualities that weary activists have found so attractive in the monastic metaphor—such as silence, solitude, anonymity—were not Merton's primary traits. If they had been, we would not be discussing his life and thought. Merton retained activist energies and stayed deeply connected with the psyche of his age. Had he not, he would never have become an international influence in movements for justice and peace, and the mentor for a legion of seekers in the world of action.

From various biographies it is clear that Merton struggled

at great personal cost to maintain an activist spirit in the monastery. Not only did he often battle with authority; he battled too with a long string of physical ailments that may well have been brought on by the tensions in his life. I do not doubt Merton's contemplative calling. But perhaps Merton needed monasticism as a foil for his own development; perhaps he needed the tension between the monastic ethos and his own vitalities to help evoke his true self. If that is so, then some of us may find clues to a spirituality for active life not so much in Merton's rendering of monastic spirituality as in the tensions between Merton's spirit and the monastic life-form.

That, at least, is where I have learned most from my own encounter with monasticism—in the tensions. My sojourn with the monks brought me a fair share of personal discouragement and defeat. But those experiences were rich with clues that now help me understand the dynamics of the active life and the spirit of truth that such a life can contain. With gratitude for the monastic path and for those who walk it in health, I want to explore some other approaches to the issues of active life.

III. AN ANCIENT TUG-OF-WAR

A tug-of-war between active and contemplative life has gone on for a long time in the Western world. Though I am not an historian and my intent in this book is not scholarly analysis but personal understanding, a rough sense of this history may give us a better understanding of our own place in the life of action.[1]

In the ancient world, contemplation was valued more highly than action. For the ancients, the active life was merely a way of meeting material needs and maintaining a household, while contemplation offered a chance at transcendence, at union with the ideal or the divine. Plato's model person was the "philosopher king" who reigned over the model society—a society designed to support an elite whose primary ser-

vice would be thought and reflection. Jesus reflects this ancient bias in the story of Mary and Martha when he claims that the reflective Mary has "chosen the better part," compared to her sister, who is immersed in the mundane tasks of housework (Luke 10:42, JB). Rooted in this bias, the church and the university became the preeminent institutions of Western culture, in part because they harbored the life of contemplation in a world where the active life was merely what the masses did to survive.

But with the Age of Exploration and the Enlightenment, with the rise of science, the Industrial Revolution, and urbanization, the rope was tugged the other way, and active life became more valued than contemplation. The reason for this shift seems clear: With the tools of science and technology, people are able to act for purposes far beyond mere sustenance and survival. Now we can use the tools of action to change the world, to invent our own reality, to make an historical mark. Knowledge, once seen as an end in itself, becomes a means to power. Action, not contemplation, becomes the pathway to personal virtue, to social status, and even to "salvation" for many modern men and women.

Today, in some quarters of our society, there has been a countermovement in this historic tug-of-war, a reaction to the dominance of activist values: It is the spiritual renaissance I spoke of earlier, the renewed search for contemplative values in the flurry of our active lives. It is easy to understand why this reaction set in and how inevitable it was. The active life seems to have run amok in the twentieth-century West. Our culture takes such overweening pride in the powers of action, and is so filled with the desire to conquer and dominate everything in sight, that there is less and less health in us. For those who see this sickness for what it is, recovery may seem to lie in a return to contemplation.

But why continue the historic tug-of-war? Contemplation and action ought not to be at war with one another, and as long as they are, we will be at war within ourselves. There are

at least two ways toward a cessation of hostilities. One is to recognize that contemplation and action are not contradictions, but poles of a great paradox that can and must be held together. That paradox is the focus of chapter 2.

A second way to end the tug-of-war is simply to acknowledge that different people have different callings. If one is called to the active life, there is no more health to be found in dealing with the challenges of the monastery than Thomas Merton found in dealing with the challenges of the world of action. We must try to live responsively to both poles of the contemplative-active paradox. But we must honor the pole of our own calling, even as we stay open to the other, lest we lose our identity, our integrity, our well-being.

For people who are called to active life there are spiritualities that pose these very dangers. For example, there are versions of prayer that seem aimed at "keeping the lid on," at internalizing all the conflicts of one's life. But if the energies being contained involve one's truth, one's nature, then the lid is bound to blow. There are versions of our basic relation to God that seem aimed at bringing us under external authority rather than encouraging and educating the powers God has given us. When a person called to active life tries to submit to such guidance, diminishment and distortion can be the outcomes.

I know from my own life the damage that can be done by the energies that give rise to action, and I know the need for good guidance. But even as I grieve that damage, I deeply appreciate and respect those energies. To name them, I believe, is to name the living God—who has many names. I struggle with those parts of our spiritual tradition in which the energies of active life are more feared than revered, pictured as wild horses to be brought under control rather than life-giving streams that flow from the source. The feelings of diminishment and guilt that such spiritualities can engender may have some short-term role as prods to self-discovery. But they have no long-term place in the life of the spirit. People

called to active life need to nurture a spirituality that does not fear the vitalities of action.

The core message of all the great spiritual traditions is "Be not afraid." Rather, be confident that life is good and trustworthy. In this light, the great failure is not that of leading a full and vital active life, with all the mistakes and suffering such a life will bring (along with its joys). Instead, the failure is to withdraw fearfully from the place to which one is called, to squander the most precious of all our birthrights—the experience of aliveness itself.

Joseph Campbell spoke of this birthright in words that I find compelling, if incomplete:

> People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we are seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That's what it's finally all about. . . .[2]

I do not think that Campbell rejects the idea of meaning so much as he insists on the primacy of embodied, active experience as the way some of us will discover what it means to be alive. He implicitly criticizes spiritualities that withdraw from life in fear rather than risk the messiness of embodiment and action. Sometimes our quest for orderly meaning comes from fear of disorderly life, from our need to dampen the disrupting rapture of which Campbell speaks. We do just that when we heap layer upon layer of spiritual meaning on life's elemental forces, when we use theology or any other meaning-system to bury the incarnation.

For me, the heart of the spiritual quest is to know "the rapture of being alive," and (here is where I find Campbell incomplete) to allow that knowledge to transform us into celebrants, advocates, defenders of life wherever we find it. The experience of aliveness must never degenerate into a narcissistic celebration of self—for if it does, it dies. Aliveness is relational and communal, responsive to the reality and needs

of others as well as to our own. For some of us, the primary path to that aliveness is called the active life. We need a spirituality which affirms and guides our efforts to act in ways that resonate with our innermost being and reality, ways that embody the vitalities God gave us at birth, ways that serve the great works of justice, peace, and love.

IV. ACTIVE LIFE AS BLESSING AND CURSE

The active life takes many forms, three of which are explored in this book—work, creativity, and caring. The three are not mutually exclusive and are often intertwined, but it will be helpful to name the main traits of each of them. By understanding each type of action, and how each differs from the others, we will be able to appreciate more about the range of issues raised by the active life.

Work is action driven by external necessity or demand. We work because we need to make a living, because we need to solve a problem, because we need to surmount or survive. I do not mean that we are mere robots when we work, totally determined by factors outside ourselves; we may choose whether to work, when to work, how to work. But work, as I use the word here, always involves the element of necessity, and that element leads to the characteristic dilemmas of this form of the active life.

Creativity, in contrast, is driven more by inner choice than by outer demand. An act cannot be creative if it is not born of freedom. In creative action, our desire is not to "solve" or "succeed" or "survive" but to give birth to something new; we want, for a while, to be less creaturely and more like the creator. If work reveals something of our bondage to the world, creativity reveals something of how we transcend it—and that fact gives rise to the dilemmas of creativity.

Caring is also action freely chosen. But in caring we aim not at giving birth to something new; we aim at nurturing, protecting, guiding, healing, or empowering something that

already has life. The energy behind caring is compassion for others which, in turn, is energized by the knowledge that we are all in this together, that the fate of other beings has implications for our own fate. Caring may take a personal form, for instance, when we comfort a grieving friend. But it can also take form through movements for political and economic justice, in speaking on behalf of strangers whose oppression diminishes us all.

In the midst of these definitions we need to remember two things. First, these three forms of action are found together as well as apart (and together is how they often appear in this book). Work can be creative, creativity can be caring, and caring can be a quality of work.

Second, though these definitions may feel airy and abstract, remember that the active life is embodied life, everyday life—so ordinary we hardly notice it. We work in offices, farms, and homes. We act creatively in everything from gardening to raising children to writing a poem. We care by visiting a sick neighbor and by marching for peace. One way or another, most of us are involved in the active life day in and day out.

But for me, and for many people that I know, these ordinary activities contain an extraordinary mix of blessing and curse. The blessing is obvious, especially when we lose the chance or the capacity to do these ordinary things: the active life makes it possible for us to discover ourselves and our world, to test and extend our powers, to connect with other beings, to co-create a common reality. The joys of action are known to everyone who has done a job well, made something of beauty, given time and energy to a just cause. Take away the opportunity to work, to create, or to care—as our society does to too many people—and you have deprived someone of a chance to feel fully human.

But the active life also carries a curse. Many of us know what it is to live lives not of action but of frenzy, to go from day to day exhausted and unfulfilled by our attempts to work,