

Spirituality and the Arts in the Benedictine Tradition Day 2, Morning Session Part 1

Good morning, everybody.

>> Morning.

So you've endured your first 18 hours.

Everything settling in fine?

Good.

This is probably going to be the prettiest day we have all week.

So I would encourage you all in your sort of allowing the day to carry you footstep by footstep to think in the direction of sort of maximizing your outdoor time this afternoon to just stroll around and explore this beautiful location.

This morning about half a million flowers suddenly popped out.

It's happening.

So one announcement before we -- well, two announcements before we get into things.

First of all, I could probably do without that.

The bookstore would like to let me know that -- let you all know that it has several books available by this sort of weird American author called Cynthia Bourgeois.

But they have "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening," "Eye of the Heart," "Love is Stronger than Death," "Meaning of Mary Magdalene," "Mystical Courage," "Mystical Hope," "Corner of Forth and Nondual," "Wisdom Jesus," "Wisdom Way of Knowing."

They've got almost everything.

So that's there.

And that's a wonderful honor that they go into that trouble.

They've also got infinite number of copies of "The Rule of St.

Benedict."

And if you don't have one already at hand, I would encourage you, like heartily, to pick one up and to keep it as part of your treasure trove of basic working books.

You can get them -- you can get most of them in really, really simple editions.

And this pair came out in 1980 to celebrate the 1500th anniversary of the birth of St. Benedict.

And it's a very, very thorough scholarly volume put together by the monks of the Benedictine Abbey, St.

John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, one of the biggest Benedictine factories in the world, copied by these that they put in every retreat room.

But in Benedictine monasteries all over the world, including this little place, the rule is still regularly read, studied, and discussed.

So it's a point that people are actually engaging with, and it's both amazingly challenging and amazingly liberating.

We're going to be talking about the rule a bit today because it really is the backbone for our study of spirituality and the arts as we work at it, certainly in the Christian contemplative tradition.

So I do encourage you to pick one up and sort of lectio divina, browse it, consult with it frequently, find the passages you love, the passages you hate, and put it in your active working repertory.

Many of you, I know, already have it.

We have a good collection of people in the choir.

As usual, I need a few more men.

And part of what we can do depends a little bit on how well we can fill out the lower voices, but we'll work with whatever we have.

Susan, will you see me at break time?

I want to engage some of your piano skills and other things with other stuff you're doing.

So tonight, I said we'd have free -- it will be slightly different every night.

And tonight I want to work with the people that signed up for choir, plus people who may not have signed up for choir but have some interest in drama and staging.

And I would say that any evening session is open to everybody.

So you can come and participate and look at things, but those are the special people that I want there as we work at it.

The way I'm going to basically be using the choir will be to do advanced study of little parts that we're going to be working with as a whole group in the afternoon, just so that we're not stumbling through it from scratch but already have a little bit of a basis underneath our belts.

So tonight we'll just take an initial meeting of the people who said they'd like to sing in choir, plus anybody who has a particularly dramatic angle of things, because we're going to be looking at beginning to stage some of these early dramas that grew up in the lap of Benedictine spiritual culture and see why they did and how they worked so brilliantly with the props on hand, the liturgical space they were in, the music and the familiar liturgical points they were used to working with became the springboard that drama took off from.

And we're going to see why that happened and why it still works so well as a formula.

So we will be looking at the very, very earliest play in the history of Christianity.

I mean, yeah, I guess you could say in the history of Christianity, because there weren't any Christian theatrical writers before the Roman Empire got sacked.

So the really birth of Christian mystical drama and the Western performance arts took place in Benedictine monasteries.

And we're going to look at what they are, because they're beautiful pieces right in and of themselves.

And then we're going to look at why this happened and how we can draw on the principles already in place to create new liturgical art, but also to improve our effectiveness in really allowing liturgical celebration to reach a high degree of not only spiritual satisfaction, but aesthetic satisfaction as well.

So that's where we're going to start today.

I'd like to start with just looking generally at the liturgy itself.

And by liturgy, I'm using the term in the wider sense, not just the Mass, but the Mass plus the divine office, the little morning prayer and evening prayer as we familiarly call

them, plus the other kinds of sacred ceremonies including baptisms, funeral ceremonies, and other events.

So all of that will be roped under the category of liturgy today.

And the most important thing I would say about liturgy is that it is itself a performance art.

And I think it's really, really important to keep this in mind.

Whether you're talking about whichever kind of ceremony, as I said before, when two or three are gathered together, performance is in their midst.

And that may be a little bit of an oversimplification, but not much so.

But a service, a group of worship, is a group of people waiting to be collected into a single energetic unit.

In other words, to be made into a whole that's greater than the sum of their parts so that they can collectively hold, celebrate, if you want to call it that, download something that can't be done just by oneself alone.

In other words, the group will, working correctly, magnify the Lord.

To quote that line from The Magnificat.

A group experience of worship can magnify it, means to make it bigger, make it more visible, make it more palpable, and really intensify the experience to the point where sacred truths that are normally so subtle that you won't just grasp them out in everyday life, become real and emblazoned in your being structure.

That's what a group can do.

It's a moving walkway straight toward the divine heart, on which we all gather together and travel.

And I think it's important to realize this from the start, that because it's a performance art, liturgy is an energetic event in time.

And it either gains energy or loses energy.

It either succeeds in its goal of magnifying the experience for everybody, delivering a coherent, impactful experience, or it scrambles and scatters the energy so that people wind up, you know, bored, dissipated, confused, and more fragmented than when they came in.

And this is true irregardless of theology.

You know, it doesn't matter whether you're preaching a liberal message, a contemplative message, a mystical message, or a uber-fundamentalist message.

Effective liturgy will enforce and enhance the theology that you're trying to put across, will make it feel whole, reasonable, or it will detract from it.

Some of the most powerfully effective liturgies are coming, at least in my own country, out of the most fundamentalist and evangelical quarters, you know, with the praise bands and the music and people go and, you know, there's a lot of just sort of theatrical rock art there.

But people go because the experience is galvanizing.

They have a powerful sense of the holy on the terms that it's offered and presented.

So don't forget that, that liturgy is not a lecture.

It's not teaching, and it's not a sacred form for the recitation and repeating of theological truth.

It's a, it's as I say, it has its own intrinsic state and internal dynamism.

It's a moving organism.

It has direction and force.

And if you work with it and not against it, it will enhance and support the experience that everyone's seeking for, which is for the ultimate reality to feel a little bit more real, you know?

A little bit more livable, a little bit more accessible.

And liturgy can do that.

Many, many decades ago, an abbot by the name of Dom Gregory Dix wrote his classic book, *The Shape of the Liturgy*.

Some of you will know it who've been to seminaries.

It's an extraordinarily gorgeous book because it's an almost perfect melding of really good scholarship and theology with an intrinsic understanding of performance and drama and shape.

So he was writing particularly about the mass in this book.

But he said that when you come to celebrate, well, anything, but particularly when it's built around the actual offering of the bread and wine.

It has this really impelling, dramatic shape.

It's almost as inexorable as, you know, if you're a musician, you know what sonata allegro form is.

It's the first movement in any sort of symphony or concert.

It's a structure, like a sonnet in poetry.

It has its fixed structure, but the structure is intended to move you through an experience, an emotional one which is aesthetically satisfying.

It gives you a deep sense of completion, having participated in a dynamism that's in its own way cathartic.

In other words, you come into it at one point, you go out of it at another point.

Having been changed and shaped by what happens in the structure and the pacing of what's there.

So he looked at the mass this way, and he said that the basic components of it is the first part is a gathering in and a collecting of the people around a central topic they're working, a central purpose, a central focus.

And this takes place in the beginning part of a service.

This is where you have your initial prayers, your confession that, you know, that basically says, here I am, Lord.

I'm in the presence, I expose myself, I repent, you know.

And then the lessons that sort of concentrate us in the readings on, well, this is gonna be the theme that we're hunkered around today.

Gathering us in to a single kind of receiving and thinking unit from the scattered places.

And then that first part culminates in the offering up of the intercessions from the group, the prayers that we raise.

That's when we have our prayers for the world and Christ.

And then in a Eucharistic service, what happens is unbrokenly, that offering up in the congregation of our prayers gets met by the celebration, by the offering up of the bread and wine.

And the priest sort of concentrating those prayers of ourself, in the Episcopal liturgy it talks about our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

Collecting that, ends it up, and then we take the bread and the wine, raise it up, and then receive in that miraculous transformation, the coming down of this Holy Spirit, the Christ presence, into these sacred elements.

You see it comes back down again.

It's then broken and offered into the flock, that are getting collected as a deeper place by this.

And at the end, there's a prayer of thanksgiving, and then they're released and sent home.

So it's all those, first and foremost, if you don't understand anything else about it, it's first and foremost a choreography.

We start with, the first thing is everybody's like this.

There's a gathering in, a lifting up that goes up, a receiving, a bringing down, a widening out, a holding of the transformation, and then a dismissal, like blowing a dandelion seed into the world.

And so, and it has this shape, not because some committee of bishops in Rome decided that this is how it has to be theologically.

It's because it follows an internal dynamism, an archetypal pattern that I'll bet you can find in your own body.

From the scattering, into the collecting, into the offering, into the receiving, into the sharing in what's received, the gathering finally of the transformed mirror, and then the sending forth.

And in a marvelous sort of bold move in the Episcopal Church in America, like now maybe 50 years ago, they gave people what they called "rite three," which was a simple Eucharistic service that had absolutely no words in it.

It just was a list of the parts of it, in order.

And they followed basically those parts, and said, "Fill in the words yourself, too, but as long as you use these parts, your service will have a classic order and flow and dynamism."

So they asked for a couple of things.

You read the Gospel.

But the rest of it, they said, "Don't get hung up on the individual bits and pieces."

And they said, "You can use the service wherever you want, except you can't use it for the main service on Sunday morning."

And so, boy, this was a sanction to contemplatives, to develop contemplative liturgy with fewer words and a much stronger emphasis on this.

But I just would invite you to be aware of it and notice the essential energy pattern that flows through good liturgy.

There's good liturgy, and there's bad liturgy, and we're going to look at a couple of reasons why good liturgy becomes bad liturgy.

But when good liturgy works, that essential archetypal choreography will impart itself.

People will dance it together, and will go out transformed by that dance.

That's the ideal.

But the most important thing to realize, particularly if you're a liturgical artist, is that the pieces of the liturgy that all have their names, the intro, the collect, the Old Testament, the readings, the offerings, they all have names.

But they're not like little pieces of laundry hung up on a clothesline, and you can't move them around and put them in different orders.

There's this forceful dynamism that happens in good liturgy.

You get on it and you ride it.

Does this make sense so far?

There's nothing casual at all.

In liturgy, like an iceberg, nine-tenths of it is below the surface of the water, and it's what's down there that's really going to affect how your soul moves into it.

So the tendency, the two things that most destroy, or most cause difficulty with liturgy, I would say are, first of all, too many words, particularly in the wrong language, and inept performance skills.

These are the big things that will scramble energy.

And fortunately, when you're dealing with a group of contemplatives, you've got more to work with, because contemplatives have begun to be trained how to pay attention voluntarily.

So they bring already a deeper gathered capacity for voluntary attention.

Parish congregations that come in, scrambled, scattered already with attention going around like... (popping) who then get submitted to this random liturgy with a lot of invented pieces, too many words, too much social action, too much gossip, too much chatter.

This kind of thing just scrambles energy and leaves people way worse than they were before.

Maybe God is sure, but you don't see the results too well.

The first thing that needs to be recognized is that liturgy is remarkably exact in its dynamism.

That it wants to move in the direction, particularly the Mass that I've just told, the pulling people in, the exchange, the offering up, the receiving down, the taking in of what's been received and appreciating it collectively, and then the going forth of the world.

It wants to have that shape.

And if you particularly interrupt the dynamism, once it starts going and the last lesson is read and the priest finally sits down from preaching the sermon and you've offered the liturgy and you hope against hopes that this is not, or you've offered the intercessions, and you try and keep it from becoming somebody having created a second sermon.

The thing is on a trajectory towards offering.

And offering up, and that's on a trajectory then towards the receiving and coming down.

And it's very, very hard to derail that.

It's way harder than it looks because the dynamism in it is so strong.

That again, the Episcopal Church had a good idea a few years ago when they were revising the liturgy and decided that there was a nice clean break, like an intermission between the two acts.

The first had to do with the words.

We read all the things, we get the preaching, we get the business done and the intercession.

Then there's this kind of intermission, and then we do the second act, which is the offering up.

So they moved the piece around that part, the kiss of peace, to end the first part.

And everybody sat there and started shaking hands with each other and bringing out their palm pilots to make dates for what they were going to do at their church.

So this piece got rowdy and out of hand.

And then somebody got the good idea, well, as long as we've gotten to the end of Part 1, we'll do the announcements then.

Because if you do the announcements before the service, half the congregation isn't there.

And if you do them after, half of them have left already.

So you've got the service that's starting to drive.

It's got the people collected.

They're just about there.

They've offered up their own prayers.

And suddenly, the thing is sliced in half to have announcements, this bumbling, awkward kiss of peace, which is everybody being cheerful and friendly to each other, and then to try and bring it back in again where we're going to focus on the sacred mystery of Christ's sacrifice on the path.

You've lost the whole first part.

So these things can't be seen with the head sometimes.

A lot of things that make theological sense, well, we can do it this way, they don't make sense when you're actually on the floor trying to do it.

And I think that successful liturgy still tends to get balanced by this intrinsic dynamism that doesn't want to be messed with.

So in good liturgy, you should use as few words as needed to actually convey the purpose because the force of the action has to overbalance the words.

As I said, it's not a theological treatise.

It's not an academic paper.

Yeah?

The other thing that seems disrupted is during that break, then they do a financial collection.

Yeah, exactly.

The gospel this Sunday that I have the honor of preaching on is throwing the money changers out of the temple.

And that's exactly--yeah, we got them captive, and so let's make a pitch for the money.

So yeah, all these things, you're thinking about that exactly right.

What interrupts and blocks the flow?

So the thing is, too many words and too many extraneous words that are out of it, over-explaining, over-interpreting, over-languaging, not trusting the structure.

I've actually watched a few liturgies coming out of contemplative circles where not a single word was spoken.

Because the gestures speak so powerfully for themselves.

And these are rare occasions.

Sometimes a gospel would be read, but I've seen them where they didn't do anything else.

People came in, they rang the bell, they sat, the priest stood up, took the bread, took the wine, offered, blessed, broke, gave.

People know the plot.

And the energy that can be gathered when you have a group with sheer attention and deep intent, gathered around a sacred and dynamic and intrinsically meaningful structure for conveying mystical truth.

When you have that set up, you can do the whole thing without words, and it works.

And I often encourage people to just go back and play with that in your own...

Be a priest for the night and work at it yourself just so that you really have in your bones the sense of the flow of things.

Because that's where the river is really flowing.

Everything else is embroidery.

So, yeah.

>> Going back to the first part, would you say something about the structure of the lectionary?

Sometimes it confuses me, sometimes it even makes me mad.

>> Yeah.

It's a difficult thing, the structure of the liturgy or the lectionary.

We're used to now being a kind of middlely oriented culture, and we combine throwing teaching about the gospel and the Bible into the first part of the service.

And so what usually happens is sometimes the lesser of two evils and sometimes the greater.

Either difficult texts are left unexplained, you know, or Psalms are read where people are cheerfully saying, "Let's bash their little heads against the millstone," and then nothing is explained.

Or else somebody over-explains everything, and every text is commented on, the service immediately goes on for two hours.

The basically fatal fly in the ointment is that that should never have been done in the first place, that you can't combine really easily the teaching function in a thorough pedagogical way.

The teaching was originally done in the church in a whole separate teaching session, where you could actually get into these things and fix it.

But that's--so there are some tastes, and I think usually what happens on Sunday, you know, in a contemplative liturgy during the week is a good thing.

Just a reading of the gospel without a lot of commentary, a contemplative silence to let it fall into place in people, and a elumination during the weekly service of the other two texts.

Psalms remain, and we're going to be talking more about Psalms later and how they're used in the monastic tradition.

But when you're dealing with a difficult structure anyway, you have to dance creatively around it.

So these are good questions to raise.

So the other thing that I would simply like to point out is that English is a particularly difficult language to work with.

And that nowadays, almost all the texts we read and work with are in English, particularly in, you know-- well, here in English-speaking countries.

But the early languages in which liturgy was conveyed and which they're still conveyed in the rest of the world are, you know, Greek, Latin, the classic language of Western Christendom was Latin.

And the language-- and of course, in the Semitic traditions, you've got Hebrew and you've got Arabic.

And what they all have in common is that they're intensely musical languages.

And they are built on a lot of open sounds like "ah" and "oh," which in a deep way nourish, actually build up the subtle nervous system.

Could you believe that "ah" is a nutrient for your chest region?

"Oh" opens the vocal, you know, opens the throat.

These things, and this is known about in some cultures, that what you're really receiving when you chant in sacred languages is not just the cognitive content of words, but the musical energy of the vibration of them.

And so in our quest to make language, you know, the liturgy comprehensible in the vernacular, which is a good-- it's a good goal.

I mean, it's important to know what you're signing on the dotted line about.

But English is a particularly unmusical language because it has a lot of short sounds, "eh," "ee," "oo," "ah," "oo," "ah," punctuated by these consonants like "tuh," "tuh," "tuh."

So it's a sort of bullet point language without these beautiful glowing syllables.

One of the reasons people still like the King James Version of the Bible is not because they're theologically conservative, but because Shakespearean English comes about as close as it comes to still preserving a musical language, which intrinsically feels holy to people.

And one of the things that happened in Vatican II when the Catholic Church shelved its tremendous ornate collection of, you know, a thousand years' worth of sacred chants, canticles, modes-- we'll talk about some of this more as we move into the day-- is that it lost a whole language, a whole subtle language of spiritual transmission and receiving, which is half an aesthetic language, but half a subtle spiritual language.

There's a really interesting story that's told and documented about a little monastery down in the south of France that had a beautiful kind of Romanesque, you know, sort of roofline, you know, with a little resonating bubble chamber above it.

The monks had been singing chant there, the old liturgy, for a thousand years or more.

And in Vatican II, they put it away, and they began, like the rest of the Catholic world, to experiment with new forms of music, which was good in the long run but awkward in the short run.

The monks very soon began to fall ill, and nobody could quite figure out why.

And the abbot, you know, messed with their diet.

It acted like chronic fatigue syndrome.

And finally, just after this long thing of trying one thing after another, a fellow came in who was actually a musical sound engineer, and they were doing a tour for setting up the acoustic, you know, the sound component, recording component for a concert they were doing.

And he took one look at this resonant bell-dome tower, they said, and said, "For God's sake, restore the chant."

The monks were malnourished.

And what was happening was meeting-- they would meet divine in the chapel, sing these "Ah, oh, hallelujah," you know.

And those "Ahs" and "Ohs" and "E's" and resonant things became essentially imaginal nutrients for the subtle body of them, which was what was really transforming.

People didn't know this about the Gregorian liturgy, and so they essentially shelved their most powerful tool of transformation.

That was why people were giving up their lives to go to the monasteries.

They didn't want to enter a grumpy old men's club.

You know, that there was--you know, if I give up my sexuality, if I give up my--you know, what do I get?

And what they could deliver in a deep way before is theosis, the divinization of the human body through the just activation of the subtle body as the new center of identity.

When, you know, when for various good reasons, Vatican II said, "Well, we've got to rebalance," and it's true.

There's an unawareness of what was lost, and so there is an unawareness of how to make it up.

I'm going to suggest later on this week that one of the things that grew up in the crack was Taizé.

You notice how much Taizé Chant is back in Latin again in a very simple way?

And it's not coincidental, I think, that these things are so lovely.

There are some subtle principles that reinforce the aesthetic principle in liturgy, but we've been in an era where everything is over-cognized.

Words are chosen or eliminated, doesn't--you know, on the basis of cognitive intent alone, without an awareness of so many of these dimensions that are what you might call sensual, subtle, and integrative.

So it means it's harder because nobody gets-- nobody gets transformed--well, they may get transformed, but you have to work harder if you're working with just the cognitive dimension.

So this is one of the ways that I believe that artists can re-infuse and help the church to deepen and enrich liturgy so that it begins to reclaim some of the shape it has as an integrative and three-centered container.

That artists know very well performance art when they see it, and I'm not talking at this point at all about turning the liturgy into an over-dramatic, you know, not laying stuff on, but really paring away so that you know what works within the context of a moving dynamism.

That one of the things that artists have, and it doesn't matter whether you're working with visual arts or auditory arts, performance arts, kinesthetic arts, dance, you name it, that there's a capacity to instantly read, integrate, and interpret pattern, to see.

You see proportion, you see balance, you see movement.

Some people like to call this "seeing with the heart."

And if you look carefully at what that means, the natural gift of the artist is the capacity to see with the heart.

And it's an extraordinary gift.

I'm using the heart here not in the sense that we often use it in the West as a synonym for emotionality or drama.

I'm using it in the sense that was alive in the early Christian tradition and then got transferred over to the Sufi tradition.

The heart as an organ of spiritual perception.

And the modern Sufi teacher and former Jesuit Kabir Edmund Helminski writes about the heart beautifully in his books on Sufism.

But he says essentially we have deep subconscious faculties that we are not using in ourself.

And by subconscious he means in this transpersonal, really.

He says, "Beyond the limited analytic intellect lies a vast realm of mind that includes," and then he lists a variety of capacities, "intuition, insight," and then he says, "a sense of proportion, image-forming and symbolic capacities, and metaphoric capacities."

And he says that though these faculties are many, we give them a single name because they are operating best when they are in concert, in other words, working together.

And he says, "They comprise a mind in total connection to the cosmic mind."

This total mind we call heart."

So for him, the heart is an organ of spiritual perception and the way it basically works is recognizing pattern, proportion, and dynamism.

And recognizing them on their own terms.

And these are qualities that are not trained for in seminary where the emphasis is almost entirely on getting the message correct.

And they're not trained for in our culture at large.

And they're kept alive in two places, in the arts and in contemplative practice where we work from two different ends of the same stick to sort of peel back that over-intellectualization of everything and allow the natural and right shape of reality and movement to emerge.

And we train ourselves that.

And you know, a good artist will look at things differently from a mental thinker who's trying to be artistic.

We have a god-awful paint job in my old hometown of Stonington, Maine when the publisher of the local press, the local newspaper, who's a little guy all the way, decided that his old building needed to be repainted.

And he chose three colors for his color scheme.

One was this sort of slightly rosy pink-red, just a little bit cranberry.

One black, one kind of purple.

And he explained what each of these colors meant.

It's red because this is passion.

And for him it didn't matter that it was rosy pink.

Red is red, right?

You know, rouge.

And it's black because of the tape printers ink that we all use.

And it's purple because sometimes our hearts are torn and broken by what we're writing about.

Well, okay, very good mental symbolism.

But that's what the building looks like.

I invite any of you visual artists to put some of slightly pinkish red and purple and black together in a building and make it look beautiful.

In other words, he was designing from his mental concepts out rather than allowing the art to unfold what actually fits together.

So the things that artists potentially have to bring to liturgy is the recognition that in and of itself, it's a beautiful, live, kinesthetic art form and a realization that a good artist doesn't just sort of willy-nilly go in there and start adding pieces, adding adaptation.

There's a respect for the overall natural flow.

There's a respect for portion, balance, and symmetry.

And there's an acute sense of when things are gaining and losing energy.

And it's one of the most important skills that artists naturally have and that those that are art artists tend to abysmally lack.

It doesn't matter how beautiful and polished a piece is, if it's overbalancing, if energy is starting to drain because it's too long or too pompous or not right timed.

You know, you've lost it.

You've wound up--if you're not intensifying a union, you're dissipating it.

It's as simple as that.

There's no halfway.

So that an artist knows that your audience is not a passive audience but is an energetic co-creator of the event you want.

And your responsibility is to maintain the intact energetic vessel in which something is conveyed.

Because if you lose the vessel, you've lost the whole thing.

You've got an academic lecture or you've got a different art form.

But that gathering, transforming, and sending forth is gone.

So these are potentially some things.

Again, I'm not talking about innovation.

It's usually a paring away rather than an adding on.

A watching from a heart of balance.

What adds and what subtracts.

Keeping a watchful eye and a beginning to realize when some things have to be adjusted in midstream because the good idea you thought you had wasn't working.

And people are--you know.

So these are responsibilities that artists intuitively know.

Plus, the other thing that can really wreck liturgy is ineptitude.

I mean, if you're dealing with performance, the things that are going to be most important are presence.

And presence doesn't need to be loud, dramatic, dominant.

You know, you don't need to be Donald Trump to be present.

Present is sometimes a quiet alertness, but it knows the right force needed for the job.

It knows that if you're reading, you have to be audible.

And that if you move, you need to move with conviction and gracefulness of being.

Because again, in an action which is conveyed as much by what's not said as by what's said, every little bit, even how you sit, even either contributes or detracts from an overall experience of resonance and wholeness.

So these are parts that a lot of people, particularly of a Protestant nature, when they realize that the church is failing and people aren't coming anymore, they say, "Well, it's because we don't have the right message."

"So we have to get the message better."

And so, you know, they're often about putting it in psychological terms or political action or sermons or being folksy.

It's almost never about the message.

It's about the delivery.

And it's about trusting what's ancient, what's working, what's simple, and filling it with the presence of a now that's respectful and quiet, but focused and alert.

So these are skills that can transform almost anything and I think are really important when we're talking about contemplative art, which is what we're talking about particularly here in a community that's founded on the mission of in some sense creating a new kind of harmonious blending between this ancient rule and tradition of St.

Benedict, which has been so hospitable to the art, like a great matrix that art grows in and thrives in.

And the confluence between this and a contemplative innerness that knows that it can all be pared down to just one word.

Just say your mantra.

And the whole of the divine presence is there.

So the words don't create that presence, they just bear it in beautiful forms.

So if you know this, it gives us a whole new opportunity in bare and stripped down places to create something again that's simple, elegant, driving towards where it's driving, and accommodates gratefully and graciously creativity without letting creativity run amok.

So that's the balance we're striving for and we're trying innovations in all contemplative communities to suggest how do we join our new traditions of deeper silence together, which weren't classically in liturgical experience in the Christian church.

Most people meditated in their cells in private.

How do we bring in this new tendency, this movement towards the understanding of the importance and beauty of meditating in the group and meld it with the ancient liturgies in a way that the ancient liturgies are upheld and protected in doing what they're doing and the two don't fight each other but reinforce each other in a new depth.

How do we use art?

How do we use movement, dance?

What do we write?

What icons are there?

All of these are questions which really put us in this wonderfully privileged place on the threshold of a new infusion and a new old imagining of what's possible in conveying divine, unboundaried, infinite in fragile creative vessels.

So it's in that spirit that I want to embark on that principle and invite us all to think, I don't know what people think when they come in to meditate and there's little bits of ancient, ancient services encasing it on either side.

But one of the things we're going to turn to right after a short break is to look at the shape of the liturgy, how Benedict himself received it and what he passed on that became such a seedbed for artistic growth and for an enriching of the human spirit.

So we'll look at that after the break.

But I just thought I would start by framing the whole context that as we pay attention to things here, to pay attention as we come into the services that we are really passing on an extraordinarily ancient, venerable and living organic substance.

The morning prayer, evening prayer, these little services that we have have got an ancient history and an intrinsic dynamism to them that when you hit them spot on those can create a fusion in a human heart.

What we're looking for, what everyone's looking for and doesn't seem to be able to find except on top of an occasional mountaintop.

But the capacity lies here and it lies within any group that gets together to undertake, to pray, to work with silence, to work with words and created form.

So, questions or comments?

Or should we just take a short break now and then come on back?

Yeah?

This energetic mystical heart, to what extent does it actually relate to your physical body, your physical pump, right?

Yeah, that's a really interesting question.

You know, yeah, you want to say it louder to everybody?

Sorry, it's this mystical, subtle heart that we have, a cosmic heart, how does it relate to our physical pumping organ heart?

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah, there's some really important things to say here.

First of all is to realize that when we use the term heart in the ancient traditions, both Christian and as it passed on from Christianity into the Sufi tradition, we are talking about and in reference to the physical heart.

We're not not talking about it.

The heart is not just a metaphor for, you know, the center of a person, wherever that is.

That we have to realize that as embodied people, the heart and actually speaking the whole kind of region of the torso because the great traditions tend not to just put it on the little flesh machine of the pump, but the whole region of the chest and the diaphragm and the solar plexus that supports is a nexus, is a connection point, an umbilical cord if you want, between the worlds.

The microcosm of my own blessed created being.

How did I get to be in a body God knows?

How did I get to be for a short time an individual pixel of consciousness?

And the body and the heart is what connects us to this great cosmic heart as Kabir Helminski beautifully described it.

We're like a little hologram of it and it does live in and through our bodies, but it's not just confined to that.

It's the dynamism between the finite and the infinite, across which something is always pouring.

What you're going to find is the basic dynamism of all liturgy.

Our heart is physically embodied, it receives it, it resonates with it, it vibrates with it, it's supported by the rest of the body, and it connects us and allows us to move into

gradually a center of selfhood, an I am that's larger and more spacious than the one that's generated principally by our mind, which is always going to feel uncertain and a little anxious and a little separated from everything.

The heart is the center of perception through connection, through belonging.

And it is true and it is real and we work with that.

We work with that in our body.

That's one of the reasons why I started yesterday, when I gave the little intro to meditation, by not starting with the techniques of how you do it, but starting with being embodied, because we are embodied when we do this.

Yeah?

You said that whole region, so does that sort of incorporate the lungs, because it's the air that we breathe in and then give back out?

Yeah, all connected, all connected.

So that whole part of the heart is using that?

Yeah, that's the whole part of it.

I think that what we're really saying is to call it the heart dynamism, rather than just, you know, my organ, because everything that lives lives in relationship with everything else.

And if it's not living in relationship with everything else, it's not living.

So, at a place like this gives us a wonderful opportunity to really become increasingly aware of that.

You know, when we get in our heads and in our usual sense of self, we forget that everything is giving and receiving all around us, including ourselves.

We just forget that and we get preoccupied with whatever it is we think we're doing at this moment.

But to stop and pay attention and really situate yourself in a field of giving and receiving in which you belong.

And this has absolutely nothing to do with whether you are emotionally worthy or anything like this.

You belong!

You're breathing!

Try not to belong.

Try not to exhale.

Try not to inhale.

You are part of a yes-ness of everything.

And don't forget it no matter how down you feel.

It is, you know, we are one huge interconnected organism of divine sentiency.

Get used to it and live in it with joy.