

# The Dangers of Introspection

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Introspection is a bit like cancer. It carries out its destructive work inside us unnoticed, and only later do we discover the damage it has done. But unlike the disease, with introspection our inner life turns against itself - with devastating consequences.

What is introspection? To understand it, it helps to look at what the Bible calls the heart. In the heart we find three functions which connect us to reality: thinking, being and doing. These functions are what I call outward-directed. These functions are absolutely critical for our relationships with that which is outside of us, beyond ourselves, in reality.

First of all they play an important role in how we *think* about reality, which in turn has an impact on how we approach reality. If we think of Mount Olympus as the home of the Greek gods, we will approach it differently than if we see it as simply a hunk of rock to be conquered. These rational or conceptual thoughts determine how we act.

These three functions are also important to how we *experience* reality. We have as people this wonderful ability to take part in and to be connected with that which is outside ourselves. Actually, this first-hand experience of an outer reality is what enables us to find a solid sense of ourselves as real. That seems a bit counter-intuitive at first, but it remains true that the more outer-directed we are, the more real we feel and experience ourselves to be. Thirdly, the three functions influence how we *respond* to this reality outside ourselves. Reality calls for certain responses from us, and through our wills we are able to make choices of how to respond in terms of thinking, being and doing.

The Bible points to these functions of the heart as necessary for engaging with what is real. Consider how Jesus teaches us about living in the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13. He addresses our rationality, to bring us to a right *thinking* about the situation. At the same time, he addresses our imagination, through the use of symbol and metaphor, which allows us to *experience*, taste and connect with what he is saying. And in his emphasis on action he addresses the will, by which we should *respond* in obedience. Though operating in different spheres, these functions are meant to be integrated in a meaningful, outer-directed connection with reality. This is the key to healthy human living.

## Endless Thinking

Introspection is what happens when the rationality and the will no longer have an outer-directedness. No longer engaging with a reality outside ourselves, we become lost within ourselves. Consequently our thinking and our wills are limited to the self, and turning inward they begin to attack and destroy the imagination. In other words, our existence becomes a matter of *thinking* and *doing*, but at a great cost. The importance of *being*, of participating in reality in an experiential way, is lost.

Let's consider first how thinking takes this priority over being. The Danish existential philosopher Kierkegaard lamented that man has forgotten how to exist. He said we no longer participate in reality, we just think about how to participate in it. We become caught up in abstract ideas. Although it is a crude term, it is accurate and appropriate to call this type of inward turn 'mental masturbation'. God created sexuality to be outer-directed, with another person. In masturbation sexuality has lost its connection with outer reality; the intimacy does not exist. You only participate with and within yourself.

The reason this is wrong is that God made us to *think* and to *be* at the same time, in conjunction. One is to feed the other. When thinking turns only inward, it actually crushes out the power to be and to have a first-hand experience of what is real outside. We become lost in a vicious cycle of thought and analysis, thinking about being, and our actual participation in reality slips further and further away.

This is a tragic cycle. A few years ago at our L'Abri two very introspective guests fell into a relationship. It was incredible to see the hundreds of hours they spent analysing it. Are we going out? Are we friends? Are we friends with privileges? There was so much analysis of the relationship that there was almost no experience of it. They had lost a sense of *being*.

## Only Doing

When thinking is given this priority over being, it often leads to a way of life that emphasizes *doing* at the expense of being as well. When this happens, our lives become a ceaseless stream of activity with little first-hand experience of what is really going on around us. It may at first glance look like a high energy existence, full of life, but it is often deeply separated from reality – a form of pseudo-being – running from one thing to the next without ever noticing the birds are singing.

People travel a lot today. Many people who come to L'Abri have marched around Europe, but have they really been there? I remember seeing a woman once at a wonderful museum, full of beautiful pieces of art. Never once did she really look at a painting. She only looked through her camera. It was a second-hand experience, mediated. The first-hand experience had been smothered.

Our busy-ness can actually annihilate our capacity for *being* in this way. The smothering of that first-hand experience does not go unnoticed. It causes a pain and emptiness inside. However, in response to that pain, we often simply become more busy! We add more and more to our schedules and fall deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of the self, cut off from outer reality.

The reason this is wrong, biblically speaking, is that in such a labyrinth there is no longer any higher motivation or understanding of how to make proper and meaningful choices. The self has only itself as a goal. There is no higher law to obey, no other concern to consider. We are left with busy-ness for the sake of busy-ness, trapped in an increasingly meaningless cycle.

What exactly does introspection do to us? It makes us empty and lonely, and it prevents us from living in the present and with wonder.

**1. Introspection makes us empty.** It empties us. I have mentioned how we need to be in connection with what is outside of us in order to feel and be real. Introspection pulls us farther and farther away from this possibility. Think of Bilbo in Tolkein's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The ring is for me a symbol of introspection; it empties Bilbo out. He says, after 60 years with the ring, "it has made me feel thin, like a little butter spread over a big piece of bread." The longer he led the inward-directed life of the ring, the less he participated in reality outside himself and the less real he actually became.

The emptier and thinner we become, the greater the darkness in our lives. It's interesting that a biblical view of light is often associated with weight, and darkness with nothingness and emptiness. As C. S. Lewis put it, glory is a bright substantiality, something inviting participation. The darkness of hell is just the reverse. For the introspective person, this empty darkness can become the only 'real' thing in their lives – a literally hellish existence. It's all they can see or feel.

**2. Introspection makes us lonely.** Loneliness is a direct consequence of too much introspection. When we get trapped in the unreal world of the self, the world of mental masturbation, we lose the ability to form the true bonds of intimacy with others. The problem often gets even worse. As we feel our own emptiness growing, we reach out to others in a desperate grasp to fill ourselves. We suck them dry, demanding of them to make us feel real again, consciously and unconsciously.

True intimacy requires that we first acknowledge the other's existence as apart from our own, having its own value and worth apart from simply what it gives us or tells us about ourselves. Only then can we really *be* in the presence of others. The trap of introspection prevents that possibility.

**3. Introspection prevents us from living in the present.** The only place where we can truly *be* is in the present. That's the only place where the self exists concretely. When we go into the past through a memory, or into the future through a fantasy, we are having a second-hand experience of reality. It comes only through thought. Though God does ask us to remember and to consider the future, God also wants very much for us to meet Him in the present. Without that concrete participation in the now, in relationship with Him, the other aspects lose their meaning.

Unless we escape the spiral of introspective thoughts, we can never be free to be connected to the reality around us – to hear the birds chirping, to feel the crunch of our toast, to live and to *be* in the moment. God made us to be *now*. In fact, we can *only be now!* Introspection threatens this participation in the moment.

**4. Introspection prevents us from living with wonder.** In real *being*, we are constantly confronted with a world that is bigger than our rationality alone can handle. Reality cannot be contained by our intellectual concepts.

That's what is great about poetry. It is a response to something bigger than our heads alone. The mysteries we confront here should inspire us to wonder, to worship even, and draw us to even deeper participation. For the introspective person, however, everything is subjected to analysis and thinking. Wonder and mystery are threatening; they have no place. For this reason those within the trap of introspection are often forced to reject mystery as something illegitimate: if it does not fit neatly into my categories, into my world of thought, then I must reject it. Far from being drawn outside of themselves into a growing relationship with reality, they bunker down in the dark and empty prison of the self.

### **The Call to Love**

It's time to hear some good news. The way out of this hellish condition has three aspects, all of which are interconnected. First of all, we have to hear the call to love. Introspection is actually the opposite of love, biblically speaking. It is only self-referential and inward, while love is outer-directed. Love is a call to get out of our heads and to participate in all that is real. That means opening our eyes and ears. It is my most frequent prayer, that my ears and eyes would be opened to the wonders of God's world and those who live in it. It is a love affair with reality!

This is a return to *being*. It rejects the subjection of being to thought or doing alone. It means a freedom to be moved by mystery again. Above all, the call to love is a call from God Himself. At the end of the day, only God is weighty enough to draw us up and out of ourselves. An encounter with God's glory is often the most powerful antidote to the poison of introspection.

"Taste and see that the Lord is good," says Psalm 34. God is not just a thought, but someone to experience in a relationship. And the life of faith is not just busy tasks, but something to participate in. The Psalmist continues: "whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good deeds, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies. Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it." It is a call away from just thinking about life or running around aimlessly. It is a call to think, do and be.

### **Self-reflection**

This brings us to the second part of the way out: the call to self-reflection. Simon and Garfunkel once sang, "slow down, you move too fast ... kicking down the cobblestones, looking for fun and feeling groovy." We need to slow down. Finding a place of quietness in which to reflect often means finding some solitude. Indeed, it is only in solitude that we can learn to listen with real attention.

This can be tricky, since it is often in solitude that the dangers of introspection are at their greatest. But the difference is clear if we listen to the Bible. In 2 Corinthians 13, Paul says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith." There is a place for self reflection. But Paul quickly adds, "Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you?" The point is not just to find yourself, but Christ who lives in you.

It is in our solitude that we can discover the greatest truth about us – that we're not alone. We meet and make connection with the God who is not only outside us, but also in us. That is the high point of Christianity: Christ in us, the hope of glory. We are His dwelling place! Self-examination here is not the practicing the presence of self, a participation dedicated to the self alone. It is practicing the presence of the living God within us, a participation dedicated to His glory.

As we learn to taste and see that presence, it will shape in us a holy intellect, a holy imagination, and a holy will. This demands some quiet and solitude. We hardly know how to stop and rest and *be* today – even the church often seems overwhelmed with activities and programs. Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still and know that I am God." It's actually an imperative – you must be still. There we discover, as the Psalmist says, that "there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God where the Most High dwells."

### **Obedience**

The third way out is the call to obedience. The idea of obedience seems so oppressive today, often because of how it is preached. However, for introspectives, it really is the way out. In John 15, Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you ... If you obey my commands you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my father's commands and remain in His love." Here obedience and love bound together. Obedience to God's law enables us to participate in His love.

Here we are called to be obedient to a law which transcends the self. As we respond, we are drawn up and beyond the self alone to a participation in something greater than ourselves. That is why the law is such a blessing! It is not self-reflected or self-created. The way out of introspection can be this simple: listening to God and doing what He says.

I close with a prayer from *The Book of Common Prayer*: “Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imagination, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you. And then use us as You want and always to Your glory and the welfare of Your people through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.”