

Paul Tournier
(1898-1986)

Paul Tournier was a deeply religious Christian doctor and counselor who lived and worked in Geneva, Switzerland. He helped many believers by putting the insights of psychology and psychiatry into Christian perspective.

At one point in his career, Tournier told his wife that he wanted to leave the practice of medicine and become an evangelist. But she was opposed to it!

Listening and openness to compromise provided him with the answer that benefited so many: he would combine his spiritual insights with his knowledge of psychoanalysis.

His many books – among them *The Adventure of Living* and *The Meaning of Persons* – integrated the psychological and the spiritual and were widely popular.

In the following selection, taken from a 1984 interview, notice Tournier's practical approach to silent meditation. He likes to meditate with a pencil in his hand because it keeps him from woolgathering!

He mentions his own clumsiness about the use of silence, instead of pretending that he is the world's greatest authority. He says also that silence is not an end in itself, but a means, a way, of coming closer to God.

Listen to Tournier as he speaks from the treasure trove of fifty years of spiritual discipline.

A LISTENING EAR: REFLECTIONS ON CHRISTIAN CARING

The Power of Listening, the Power of Silence

Doctors are among the busiest people in our day. It is significant, therefore, that it is a doctor who emphasizes for us the importance of silence, of meditation. You have practiced meditation constantly for the last fifty years. Why?

Modern people lack silence. They no longer lead their own lives; they are dragged along by events. It is a race against the clock. I think that what so many people come to see me for is to find a quiet, peaceful person who knows how to listen and who isn't thinking all the time about what he has to do next. If your life is chock-full already, there won't be room for anything else. Even God can't get anything else in. So it becomes essential to cut something out. I'm putting it as simply as I can.

Can one define silence?

It is extremely difficult. For me, above all it is a waiting. I wait for God to stimulate my thoughts sufficiently to renew me, to make me creative instead of being what St. Paul calls a tinkling cymbal. It's the cornerstone of my life. It is an attempt at seeing people and their problems from God's point of view, insofar as that is possible.

What was your first experience of meditation?

Trying to listen to God for a whole hour and hearing nothing at all!

Others would have been put off. You weren't?

It put me on my mettle! Was I really not capable of doing something so simple? What had interested me was the idea of listening in to God. That goes beyond silence. Silence is no longer an end, but a means. The most precious thing of all is the possibility of being, through the words in my mind or through my inborn unconscious faculties, the recipient of thoughts that come from God.

After that first failure, or that first challenge, did you persevere?

Often after that my meditations seemed pretty unproductive. There comes into one's mind the thought of some step to take, perhaps a letter to write. We have to realize that we always resist doing quite simple things that we know we ought to do. If we can manage to understand the reason for this resistance we are on the way to self-discovery. That's what makes meditation precious.

There's a resemblance here to psychoanalysis. Who was it who established the value of silence?

Freud. He revealed its enormous power. Under psychoanalysis, there is a moment when the subject feels silence weighing on him terribly. He longs for the doctor to say something to him. Silence has the power to force you to dig deep inside yourself. It was a phenomenon well known to Jesus, who would go off to spend a whole night in the desert. St. Paul was aware of it, and all the mystics as well. It involves a restructuring of the person, which leads to the discovery of underlying motives.

Can silence be an important element in the life of a nonbeliever?

Of course. Silence has a psychological aspect. For me it means listening to God, but for others it may represent a way of deepening self-knowledge.

I have often had occasion to share silence with others. I can say in general that it is the less sophisticated person who understands best. A rustic who decides to listen in to God can in five minutes make you a list of all his problems, which a professor of philosophy would be incapable of doing. Children understand straightaway, too. The naked truth comes out. We are dealing with simple matters, and modern people have lost their understanding of such things.

So that intellectualism can, in a way, be a hindrance?

Yes, indeed. In medical practice too it is the intellectual who is the most difficult to treat. Not for nothing did Jesus say that we must become like little children. On the other hand, an intellectual who undergoes a profound spiritual experience has much that he or she can offer.

You said in a recent lecture that meditation had helped you to discover "the immensity of the personal problems" that almost everyone has to face. How did you come to this perception?

People confide their problems to us in accordance with our readiness to listen. It is a barometer. The ability to offer oneself depends to a great extent on this discipline of meditation in which we bring our human relationships before God in order to smooth the way.

You spoke just now of meditation practiced in the company of others. Is there not a danger there of imposing your thoughts on others?

The more I am persuaded of the importance of seeking God's will for oneself, the more skeptical I become about the possibility of saying what is his will for others. That is the source of all kinds of intolerance and abuse. People who claim to know what is God's will try to impose it upon others with the arrogance which comes from the conviction that they are the repositories of divine truth. I avoid that at all costs. I can never know what is God's will for someone else. Even in psychoanalysis doctors generally prefer that their patients should make their own discoveries. If doctors start making suggestions of their own, they almost always go astray.

If it is wrong to tell others what they ought to do, do you still think that one can help them to overcome their mental blockages?

It is only insofar as I can overcome my own reluctance to recognize the truth about myself, that I can help others to overcome their own resistance.

I ought to say a little about the role of silence in the marriage relationship. For my wife and me it was essential. It is in silence that one thinks of the things that are not easy to say to each other, and which one is afraid may be misunderstood or arouse criticism. In silence, these restraints lose their force. Without these periods of silence we tend to confess only the favorable things and not the things we are ashamed of. For us, meditation became the road to really knowing each other. Many couples who think they are talking openly to one another about everything are just deluding themselves. You can even say prayers and sing hymns together and still have mental reservations and no true openness towards one

another. In meditation there takes place a reciprocal interpenetration which cannot be achieved by any other means.

The morning quiet time seems so difficult at first. Can one get used to it so that it comes naturally?

Quite often I have persevered with it just in order to stick to a resolution I have made. Obviously there are times when you are more or less forcing yourself to do it for the sake of your own self-esteem. You get through periods of spiritual drought that way. And then the thing becomes real again; you get a fresh start, as it were, and you don't any longer have to rely on the motivation of vanity.

We know you don't like laying down rules, but can you give some indication of what a typical meditation might consist of?

I practice written meditation. It may not suit everybody. There are some who say that having a pencil in their hand is enough to prevent them meditating, because they feel that it makes it too mechanical. But it suits me very well, because I used to have a tendency to daydream in my meditation. The act of writing prevents me from slipping into wool gathering. Aimless musing may be agreeable, but it has nothing to do with the realities of life. Another thing is that writing things down is like knocking nails in to make them firmer. It commits us more.

Do you consciously direct your thoughts?

As little as possible. God's way of thinking is different from ours. And the whole point is that we should take the great leap from our own thoughts to those of God.

One last point. How are we to discern God's will amongst the clutter of our own imaginings?

The most important thing is patience. If I may recount a personal experience, I must tell you that I once almost gave up medicine in order to become an evangelist. The idea tempted me, but my wife was not in agreement. You can see that it is not easy to be sure what is God's will. We spent some months in great perplexity, and I was even in despair at times, until I became convinced that I ought not to leave medicine, but instead introduce

into medicine the experience I had had. Suddenly it all became clear: it was not a compromise, but a synthesis. That was what made it creative. It was not that the view of the one or the other had triumphed, but that a third way, a most productive one, had been found. I am happy to speak of this, because it illustrates both the importance of trying to let God guide us, and the difficulties that that involves. Patience is vital. Generally when God's will is made manifest, it is obvious and everyone recognizes it. Unfortunately, however, that is infrequent. One would like it to happen more often. But then, that would make us arrogant...

BIBLE SELECTION

Psalm 40:1-8 (NLT)

"I waited patiently for the Lord to help me,
and he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the pit of despair,
out of the mud and the mire.
He set my feet on solid ground
and steadied me as I walked along.
He has given me a new song to sing,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see what he has done and be amazed.
They will put their trust in the Lord.

Oh, the joys of those who trust the Lord,
who have no confidence in the proud
or in those who worship idols.
O Lord my God, you have performed many wonders for us.
Your plans for us are too numerous to list.
You have no equal.
If I tried to recite all your wonderful deeds,
I would never come to the end of them.

You take no delight in sacrifices or offerings.
Now that you have made me listen, I finally understand —
you don't require burnt offerings or sin offerings.
Then I said, "Look, I have come.
As is written about me in the Scriptures:
I take joy in doing your will, my God,
for your instructions are written on my heart.""

BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "Jesus I wait ..."

(Exhale) "... draw near to my heart."

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. How have I experienced that "God's way of thinking is different from ours"? What biblical examples illustrate this contrast?
2. This week, carve out some dedicated time to listen to God and write down what you hear God saying to you.
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: Practice the discipline of silence with someone close to you, whether it's a spouse, friend, or another family member with whom you spend significant time. Agree to share a period of silence together, listening to what God wants to say about your relationship.

REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

I met Paul Tournier only once. I was at the beginning of my career path; he at the end of his. I learned only at the very last moment that he would be coming to the meetings where I was scheduled to speak. I tried to get the director to have him speak rather than me. In vain. Now, you might well imagine (as I did at the time) what kind of "wisdom" was upon my head in those days so long ago. But I spoke as required, and I must tell you that Tournier was very kind and affirming to me; and he did indeed speak to us toward the end of the conference – powerful, life-giving words.

Tournier, by his own admission, was a withdrawn and private person. And yet through his practice of listening to God he learned to become no longer "monsieur le docteur" in white coat and stethoscope but a fellow human being facing life problems like our own. In one of his writings he tells of a startling result of this listening to God and sharing with others. Listen.

"One time God directed me to share with a patient something that to me seemed so trivial – indeed faintly embarrassing – that only years of learning to trust Him made me do it. This particular man had been coming to see me for weeks without ever getting down to what was really bothering him. One morning he asked me, 'How do you use the quiet time you speak of in your books?'

"Suspecting that he was not really interested but just seeking again to avoid some subject that frightened him, I said, 'Let's not talk about it. Let's try it.'

"We closed our eyes, and I prayed earnestly that he might have a real experience with God. How faith building it would be if He would give us both some inspiring message! But instead of inspiration all I seemed able to think about was the bills that were due this month. I've got to sit down tonight, I thought, and go over the household accounts with my wife. This would never do! I should have been setting an example of prayer, not fretting over money!

"Then came the unmistakable directive: Confess to this man what you've been thinking about. Well, I wrestled as I always do, but I finally got it out. He looked startled. "That is my problem!" he cried. 'I must lie to my wife about money every day because I have a secret life. How did you know?'

With the truth at last out in the open, we were able to face his problems together. But it might not have happened if I had tried to hide behind the facade of 'spiritual' mentor... For I have found that it is not when we are most lofty minded but when we are most human that we come closest to God. It is a truth He must reteach me every day."

Me too.