

Marcy Heidish

Soul
AND THE
CITY

Finding God in the Noise and Frenzy of Life

Soul
AND THE
CITY

Finding God in the Noise and Frenzy of Life

Marcy Heidish



WATERBROOK
P R E S S

SOUL AND THE CITY
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921
A division of Random House Inc.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

ISBN 978-1-4000-7436-5

Copyright © 2008 by Marcy Heidish

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of The Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

WATERBROOK and its deer design logo are registered trademarks of WaterBrook Press, a division of Random House Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Heidish, Marcy.

Soul and the city : finding God in the noise and frenzy of life / Marcy Heidish. — 1st ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. 203) and index.

ISBN 978-1-4000-7436-5

1. Cities and towns—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. City dwellers—Religious life. I. Title.

BR115.C45H44 2008

248.409173'2—dc22

2008001349

Printed in the United States of America
2008—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

SPECIAL SALES

Most WaterBrook Multnomah books are available in special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special interest groups. Custom imprinting or excerpting can also be done to fit special needs. For information, please e-mail SpecialMarkets@WaterBrookMultnomah.com or call 1-800-603-7051.



*In loving memory
of Rev. Thomas P. Gavigan, SJ,
mentor, guide,
teacher, model,
friend*

CONTENTS

1	Finding God in the City— <i>The Gateway for Seekers</i>	1
2	Finding God in Crowds— <i>The Gateway to Connection</i>	9
3	Finding God in Noise— <i>The Gateway to Stillness</i>	26
4	Finding God in Haste— <i>The Gateway to Deliberation</i>	44
5	Finding God in Stress— <i>The Gateway to Serenity</i>	64
6	Finding God in Distractions— <i>The Gateway to Simplicity</i>	86
7	Finding God in Chaos— <i>The Gateway to Peace</i>	101
8	Finding God in Gutters— <i>The Gateway to Giving</i>	119
9	Finding God in Aloofness— <i>The Gateway to Mercy</i>	138
10	Finding God in Isolation— <i>The Gateway to Community</i>	156
11	Finding God in Emptiness— <i>The Gateway to Worship</i>	171
12	Finding God in the Concrete— <i>The Gateway to Gratitude</i>	188
	Notes	195
	Bibliography	203
	Index	211

*A city that is set on a hill
cannot be hid.*

—MATTHEW 5:14



*Oh, what a beautiful city...
Twelve gates to the city,
Hallelujah!*

—AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUAL



FINDING GOD IN THE CITY

The Gateway for Seekers

The nave's blue light bathes me. The midtown church arches over its visitors. Quietly, I stop to pray. After a few hushed moments, I become aware of a woman beside me. She hovers there, shifting from one foot to the other. Sensing some spiritual urgency, I offer my spot to her for her own prayer.

But the woman remains standing, hands on hips, and confronts me: "So. Tell." She leans closer. "I gotta know." She leans closer still. "Who does your hair?"

In an urban environment, it's easy to be distracted from our spiritual focus, even in a glorious house of worship. The traditional spiritual aids of silence, solitude, simplicity, and serenity aren't always available in a city. The pace is fast, rather than contemplative. Nature's focal points are scarce amid glass-and-concrete towers. Prayer can seem muted by traffic noise and vendors' cries. In bustling streets, it may be difficult to make time and

space to practice God's presence. And yet...isn't it in the metropolis, the marketplace, the municipal magnet that we often feel the greatest need for a sense of the sacred?

Sin.

Stress.

Seduction.

Soul-lessness.

For many people, these words are synonymous with city life—and they form a time-honored viewpoint. As symbols of evil, the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah live in our collective consciousness; the name of one has even entered our language. Throughout Scripture, folklore, and literature, the “big city” is often seen as a tempting nexus of vice where we stand in real danger of losing our souls. Is it any wonder that New York City is dubbed the “Big Apple,” a large and luscious logo for original sin?

This image of cities lingers in the modern imagination. In Bernard Malamud's famous novel *The Natural*, the young hero, Roy Hobbs, leaves his farm and loses his innocence in Chicago, where he suffers a deep fall from grace. In the classic story *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, the heroine, Dorothy, sets out to find “the answer” in the fabled Emerald City. Like a pilgrim, she travels with other seekers, only to find that the Wiseman of Oz is a fraud, and the city lives up to its archetypal image of hucksterism, especially compared with Dorothy's home on a Kansas farm.

These themes stand in a long tradition of cautionary tales about the soul and the city—not just in folklore, but in the Bible. There, writes Robert C. Linthicum, “the city is depicted as both a dwelling place of God and his people and as a center for Satan and his minions. The city is one primary stage on which the drama of salvation is played out. And that is no less the case as mega-cities become the focal point for most human activity and aspirations in the world.”¹

Cities, however, are also strongly associated with the sacred. In Scripture and song, heaven itself is often portrayed as a city. Jerusalem, Rome, Mecca, Canterbury, and other earthly cities are enduring metropolitan centers dedicated to the holy.

In the Middle Ages, the great cathedrals of Europe rose in cities. For centuries, these cities have attracted pilgrims who still come to gather in reverence, from Compostela in Spain, to Canterbury in England, and of course to that crossroads of faith, Jerusalem. Modern cities attract pilgrims too: seekers of all ages, who come for change, opportunity, and—increasingly now for retirees—culture and convenience.

I've always gravitated toward cities to find inspiration from their diversity and their culture. When I first moved back to Manhattan, I thought the museums, theater, and concerts would fill my soul. The cultural life was indeed superb. Still, I found that I needed a deeper sense of inspiration in the urban landscape's busyness.

I'm not alone.

Today, cities and large towns are home to millions of people who have *not* lost their souls—and who have created beautiful, diverse houses of worship, testaments to that fact. City dwellers and urban commuters still seek the spiritual dimension, one that saturates their routines, sustains them through the demands of urban stress, and gives life a greater depth. There's a hunger for something more than externals, for something that runs as a deeper, enduring current to nourish the soul in the city.

Thomas Moore wrote: "Care of the soul is inspiring. The act of entering into the mysteries of the soul, without sentimentality or pessimism, encourages life to blossom forth according to its own designs and with its own unpredictable beauty."²

"In spite of everything I had, all that I had accomplished," writes physician Paul A. Wright, of Steubenville, Ohio, "I still had not achieved my ultimate goal in life: inner peace and happiness.... As my medical practice grew, so did my stress."³

From the Midwest to the East and West Coasts the story is the same. *New York Magazine* has run stories on urban burnout, especially among the young and wealthy, and the quest for peace of mind continues throughout all cities.

"Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, are his who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy are only from God," writes Frederick Buechner in *The Magnificent Defeat*.⁴

We may wrestle with that admission, as Jacob wrestled with the Angel, but this is a truth that urban living can reveal to us in surprising ways.

No one observes this better than Buechner. In *The Hungering Dark*, he wrote about seeing a Fellini film, *La Dolce Vita*, in which a huge, holy statue was being carried by helicopter to Vatican City. The statue hung from a harness of the chopper and attracted laughter from the movie audience as the young pilots descended slightly to ogle some girls sunbathing on a roof. But as the helicopter approached the city, the camera zoomed in on the statue until the face of Christ filled the screen. Buechner noted that the audience in the theater fell silent. Suddenly it was “as if the face were their face somehow, their secret face that they had never seen before...or the face that they knew, if only for a moment, they belonged to.”⁵

In a city, perhaps more than in any other locale, we have God’s face all around us, if we look for it—not in the sky, but in the faces of others. Whether we’re talking about Los Angeles or Louisville or Bakersfield or Bend, cities can show us how varied we are as human beings: varied in ethnicity, race, age, style, health. We might think the cityscape hides God, but in a unique way, a metropolis reveals God’s presence through the diversity of His children, for all are created in God’s image.

Our Restless Hearts

I remember when I returned to a city after living briefly in a small town. At first, I was stunned by the spread of concrete, the roar of traffic, the faster pace, the near absence of birdsong and foliage. On a busy street, I stopped someone to ask for the time and was rewarded with a smile, an answer, and a sudden sense of connection.

As I opened myself more fully to others, this sense increased. The city’s very restlessness seemed shared with the crowds I joined.

“O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you,” Saint Augustine wrote in his famous *Confessions*.⁶

How well this applies to those of us who live in metropolitan areas and large towns—or who commute to them daily or weekly. Few of us can run away to a retreat house whenever we feel a spiritual need, which may be as frequent as every day. How then do we respond to our need for peace, for spiritual connection, for that something more that gives life dimension and deeper meaning? How do we find God in the contemporary city? Does the city conceal God from us or reveal Him in unexpected ways?

I've come to believe the answers are closer than we realize. Cities, despite first impressions, can and do offer us dynamic opportunities to forge, deepen, and transform our spiritual lives. Screaming sirens give us a chance for anonymous intercession. Skyscrapers, like spires and minarets, lift our eyes. A red traffic signal gives us a moment for petition or praise. And everywhere, the homeless and the broken demand our compassion.

What we once might have seen as distractions can instead be spiritual openings—"gateways," I call them, or invitations and beckonings to God's presence. Each gateway invites us into a deeper spirituality, not in spite of the city, but because of it. In a cityscape, for example, there are plentiful ways to pair prayer with social service. We're challenged to see God in the speed and stress of the urban scene but can find spiritual oases in parks, museums, concert halls, and varied houses of worship.

Cities give us a keen opportunity to integrate the spiritual life with the worldly life. The urban environment weaves together both elements in a pungent, sometimes paradoxical, blend. I realize that the Holy can come to me not only in retreat houses or church gardens but right where I am: in the midst of multitudes. I can reach out, I can worship, not only in privacy but even caught in a crush of others—on a street, on a highway, in a cityscape.

This is part of everyone's spiritual legacy, everyone's story. And when I reflect on this truth, I must admit that it comes as something of a shock to me. This is not the venue I expected for a spiritual life. But I am finding it surprising and rich.

You can too.

In the following chapters, discover with me new kinds of spiritual practice seen through an urban lens. Like the diverse nature of cities themselves, I've drawn upon a wide range of sources—from Mother Teresa of Calcutta to Frank Laubach, the evangelical missionary who developed a vast literacy program in the Philippines. Every chapter includes useful questions and ideas for measuring soulsickness in the city as well as a psalm and cures (“Stop,” “Yield,” and “Go”) to reflect upon, discuss with others, and try on your own.

The Holy One *can* be rediscovered in the city, where we can find, in Gerard Manley Hopkins' words, a world that is “charged with the grandeur of God.”⁷



*O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth
for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land,
where no water is;*

*To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary.
Because thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise
thee.*

*Thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy
name. (Psalm 63:1–4)*

CURES FOR *Soulsickness* IN THE CITY

Stop: Read and Receive

1. Am I an urban person or an urban commuter seeking a greater depth in my spiritual life?
2. What would a deepened spiritual life look like for me in the city—or passing through one?
3. What aspects of my city overpower my spiritual life?
4. Which aspects of my city enhance my relationship with God? The city's energy? diversity? cultural life? What can I celebrate and tap to feed my soul?

Yield: Reflect, Journal, or Discuss

5. When I reflect frankly, do I tend to see my city more as a version of the biblical Babylon or as the holy city of Jerusalem? How so?
6. If I see the city both ways, can I live with my ambivalence or do I need to make some changes?
7. When I seek to deepen my spirituality, do I find myself overwhelmed with the stimuli and distractions of a big city?
8. I can balance a city's many opportunities with time for God these three ways. (List three ideas.)

Go: Experience and Engage

9. Begin keeping a journal about your spiritual experiences in the city. Watch, reflect, and listen to God, yourself, and the city itself. Start today. Where did you feel a soulsickness? When did you sense God—in what circumstance? Describe what happened and how you felt about the moment.

10. Offer up to God this time of reading, reflecting, and journaling as a form of worship.
11. Write a brief prayer about your heart in the city—what you love and are grateful for, what you lack and yearn for.
12. Discern where you most need soul in the city:

At my home because (fill in this blank)

At my work because (fill in this blank)

Where I go for entertainment and social life
because (fill in this blank)

Where I go for groceries, services, and supplies
because (fill in this blank)

FINDING GOD IN CROWDS

The Gateway to Connection

A man is grating beets at a major intersection in midtown Manhattan. Squatting on a tarp, he flicks his tool, showing how it shaves the sturdy purple vegetable in his hand. Crowds surge past him. Hurried people step over his wares. Traffic lights change, and another wave of pedestrians circumvents him. He reaches for a carrot as a bus screeches to a stop and disgorges its passengers. Exhaust fumes streak the air. A homeless woman gulps water from a decorative fountain, and a bicycle messenger swiftly dodges the grater of vegetables.

Near him, I stand frozen, overwhelmed by the crowds. I wonder why I ever came back to this city. Is it possible to have any kind of spiritual life here? Can I sense God's presence here? I need that; I've always needed that, even when the need was rudimentary and intensely private—and I know I'm not the only one with that thirst, that desire.

Millions of urban people seek spiritual lives that go beyond weekly gatherings for corporate worship—lives that reach beneath the urban

forest to nurture the very roots of their beings. We need “to be quiet for a while, each day, in a world that prizes activity. We want to rest and reconnect with what makes us brave,” writes Claudia Horwitz in *The Spiritual Activist*.¹ Whether or not we belong to a religious community, whether we even speak of spiritual need, for so many of us, “what makes us brave” is time and space for God.

How to find this in a crowd?

How to find it at a frenetic urban intersection, where the only island of peace seems to be a beet grater’s tarp, spread on concrete?

That afternoon, as I stood beside him, I had a simple urge to flee to a house of worship, to find refuge in a church’s lakelike light, as I did from the time I was a child. But I am no longer a child; somehow I had to discover a way to sense God in the cityscape and its crowds. I could only stand there, pinned like a moth to the corner of Lexington and Fifty-seventh, buffeted by more people, and murmur, “God, help me.”

At that corner, encased in a raised metal sleeve, a construction cable stretched across the sidewalk. I watched a frail, elderly woman approach the cable with hesitation and apprehension. She paused, reaching out to me, just as I instinctively reached out to her. Our hands clasped; our eyes met. There was a small, still moment. And then she crossed over the barrier. We exchanged murmured words, and she passed on, finally lost in the crowd.

As I strained for a glimpse of her, I was reminded of Thomas Merton’s words in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. To be exact, in the section called “The Vision of Louisville,” Merton wrote about a transformative moment experienced in Louisville, Kentucky:

At the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another, even if we were total strangers. And they were all walking around shining like the sun. It was like waking from a dream of separateness.²

Mark Lewis, a pastor in Secaucus, New Jersey, underscores this view: “There is a promise before us that a vision of the world and everything in it is suffused with divine light... possible for everyone.” Even in city crowds, *especially*, perhaps, in city crowds, where such a vision is so needed, where the world is too much with us, where we are weary, worried, rushed, and crushed, even there “is a dazzling reality just beneath the surface and if you want, that’s what you can see.”³

For many people, a fast-moving throng seems to hum with excitement or pulse with energy. A friend says that he experiences a stronger sense of the life force on crowded city streets than anywhere else. He thrives on the human diversity and the pace that a metropolis offers.

For others, though, urban crowds mean congestion, chaos, jostling, and stress, none of which seem conducive to spirituality. Another friend says she thinks of herself “ricocheting off the elbows of strangers” as she navigates her way through big-city streets. Another likens a crowd to a herd of bison, ready to stampede.

There’s even a term called “crowd-sickness,” which may especially affect those with sensitive, empathetic natures: the feeling of being bombarded by too much—too many people, too much energy. Some people develop agoraphobia (literally “fear of the marketplace”), which causes anxiety or panic not only in throngs of people but in open spaces as well.

Although I don’t suffer from agoraphobia, I’ve often found urban crowds challenging to my own spirituality. I’m a private person with a quiet life and a contemplative nature; although I’ve lived most of my life in large metropolitan areas, my sense of crowd stress has dissipated only recently. It happened when I took that stranger’s hand and looked into her face.

God in Others

Human connection seems to be an antidote to crowd-sickness. We are created in God’s image—and yet, how easy it is to lose hold of this foundational belief. Like J. Brent Bill, author of *Mind the Light*, I often forget

to look for God in the faces of the urban tableau.⁴ For a long time, the faces used to blur and I felt overwhelmed by the multitudes. Sometimes, I simply didn't look at individual faces. I too easily lost that sense of "otherness" and only felt the pressure to keep moving, to navigate my own path.

How much I've missed.

"When I see God shining in the facial expressions, comments, and body language of the people I see every day, I appreciate things that separate us," Bill writes. "Such seeing doesn't deny the differences, but helps me to perceive them as gifts. This then leads me further down the path where there's a possibility of my learning to love [others] in the same way God loves them and me."⁵

But what of the people in crowds who do not seem lovable to us?

In cities we see a wide variety of humanity. Few of us are beautiful; some of us are angry, aggressive, jostling, and pushing. Many are on the fringes of society, displaying individual brokenness for all to see. Some seem to have it all, the stylish and well-heeled: easier to judge or envy, perhaps, than to care for.

"You can see the beauty of Christ in each individual person, in that which is most his, most human, most personal to him," advised Thomas Merton.⁶

There is a Jewish prayer that reminds me to see God in others: "Blessed art thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, who dost vary the aspect of Thy creatures." This prayer is to be said when "seeing a person of abnormal appearance."⁷ While it's difficult to say what normal is—we each have our abnormalities, our own idiosyncrasies, obvious or hidden—such prayers unite us in our diversity. Such prayers can help us amid the crowd to praise God for our differences. It's worth noting too that these prayers are not reserved only for solitude, but designed for life on the move—real, chaotic life.

The Holy Ordinary

If we attempt to be mindful of others, we can see the holy in the ordinary: a keystone of many spiritual traditions. Dorothy Day, the journalist and

social activist, said, “Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts. . . . It is. . . with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers and children that he gazes; with the hands of. . . slum dwellers and suburban housewives that he gives.”⁸

But this viewpoint may be challenging to us. We don’t see halos around the heads in a crowd, Day admitted. “If everyone were holy and handsome, with. . . neon lighting [around] them, it would be easy to see Christ in everyone.”⁹

A crowd challenges us to see others with compassionate eyes. And a city multitude teaches us other disciplines as well, among them patience, respect, and tolerance. I’m constantly learning this when caught in a crush of people moving more slowly or more quickly than I am. It’s so easy to grow impatient or defensive; it’s not so easy to have the patience with others that God has with us. But when I bear this in mind, I find a greater peace within. I notice too how often people make way for others and respect individual space.

Paul said that in God “we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

How often we miss an encounter with God if we do not look for the Holy One in the people we walk among in a crowd.

I know many people who say they like to people-watch. Perhaps people-watching could take on a spiritual dimension when we’re mindful of God in each person. This mindfulness takes practice and a willing heart. I fail more often than not. But I’m not alone as I try and fail and try again; the Holy One is with me. This we are each promised.

Prayer in Crowds

Several years ago I had the privilege of doing volunteer work with homeless women. I’ll always remember the woman I’ll call Nell, who had a kind heart, a pink plastic purse from Goodwill, and a vast memory of Scripture from her Baptist tradition. In a shelter’s Bible study session, we discussed that seed of secret growth present within each of us.

“Sometimes,” Nell said, “life presses me down so hard, I can’t pray nohow.” She paused. “That’s when the little seed inside me prays for me.” The Holy Spirit, she explained, was not concerned with where she was—she could be on the street or in a crowd and be in prayer at the same time. Crowds and noise didn’t faze her. But even Nell felt a need for solitary prayer at times. Every day, she would say, it’s important to take some moments for quiet prayer.

She didn’t mean limit your prayer life to solitude and rule out those vast expanses of time when you’re among others. Who, after all, can limit God or the ways God comes to us? We cannot limit where or when God’s presence feels immanent, intimate, close.

“Solitude,” writes Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline*, “is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place. There is a solitude of the heart that can be maintained at all times. Crowds, or lack of them, have little to do with this inward attentiveness. . . . Whether alone or among people, we always carry with us a portable sanctuary of the heart.”¹⁰

Foster’s not writing about that painful form of loneliness that comes from feeling alone in a crowd. He’s describing that sense of an inner, portable sanctuary, cupped within us, not an attribute of especially holy people, but part of us all—the part that Jesus told us was like a seed growing in good soil (see Matthew 13:23).

Breath Prayer

I learned a great deal about praying in crowds from homeless women, especially Nell. She practiced prayer on the street by holding a phrase from a hymn, a song, or Scripture with her throughout the day and repeating it to herself—and to God. Sometimes, she said, the phrase was short. For example, “Lord, have mercy on me.” Sometimes she would vary this phrase by praying it as intercession: “Lord, have mercy on her/him/them.” Other times the phrase was longer. Nell chose a new phrase every morning and sometimes, when sorely pressed, used a different one for morning, afternoon, and evening. Often she suited her phrase to her spiritual need: “Lord, get me through,” or, “Dear God, hold me close.”

Without realizing it, Nell was following an ancient tradition from the Eastern Orthodox Church: a devotional expression called “aspiratory prayer” or “breath prayer”: a prayer that can be said (aloud or silently) in one breath. In this tradition, the Psalter is often the source of such prayers. A couple of phrases could evoke for Nell a whole psalm, remembered and recited silently. “I fear no evil” and “for Thou art with me” brought back the entire Twenty-third Psalm, with its message of God’s comfort and enduring presence.

Whether her inspiration was from the Psalter, the gospels, or her own heart, Nell’s example teaches us that we can develop individual forms of breath prayer, each tailored to our own needs and well suited to spiritual practice in city crowds.

When we cannot pray, I’m encouraged by Nell’s mention of the seed within: the Holy Spirit, who prays for us, as the New Testament promises. On busy streets or stuck in gridlock traffic, we can be assured that the Holy One is not only hearing our prayers but helping us form them as well.

Spontaneous Prayer

Recently, as I stood on a city street corner waiting for a green light, a bicycle messenger whizzed by, just missing me and two other pedestrians. So close was the cyclist, I could smell the garlic he’d had with lunch.

“Oh, Lord,” gasped the woman beside me.

“God, help,” I murmured.

There they were: spontaneous prayers offered up on a busy urban corner while a lunch-hour crowd surged and ebbed and surged again. Anthony Bloom, the great spiritual writer and Eastern Orthodox archbishop, speaks of “spontaneous prayer, the kind that gushes out of the our own souls.” Sometimes this occurs at moments of danger or desire.¹¹ Most of us have experienced this at times of fear, need, or longing. This kind of prayer can take us by surprise with its intensity.

In calmer moments, you can summon spontaneous prayer, whether silent, vocal, formal, or informal. Such prayer can be integrated with daily

life, if it comes from the heart, which is where you find God, not “out there somewhere,” but within: the door at which God constantly knocks.¹²

You can choose a prayer that you can say or repeat inwardly with all your heart, will, mind, and soul; such prayers can be offered silently in the midst of crowded avenues and freeways, shopping malls and stores.¹³ There are numerous opportunities for this, times when you pause or wait or walk. Then a prayer word or breath prayer can be interwoven with the fabric of your day.

Nell, the homeless woman who had so little, lived with a constant sense of God’s nearness to her, and she resented a social worker who downplayed her spiritual sensibilities. In fact, those sensibilities had been a part of Nell’s daily life in her devout childhood home and to her were “nothing special,” as she said. She quietly, steadily, maintained a knowing that she was always in God’s sight, and to God’s presence she was attentive.

I wondered how Nell could maintain this knowing as she moved through every phase of her challenging, uncertain, crowded urban life. If she could have put this attitude into words, she might have said, “That’s just how it is.”

Secret Prayer

What if Nell’s spiritual companion were you?

Holy people aren’t necessarily found among the canonized saints, Thomas Kelly reminds us in *A Testament of Devotion*, a spiritual classic. These people quietly maintain “the practice of secret prayer” and are “housewives and hand workers, plumbers and teachers, learned and unlettered, black and white, poor and...rich.”¹⁴ And all of them are in the crowds we mingle with in cities.

Can we really be like them? Is it truly possible for us to navigate our way through a crowd and be attentive to God?

“Begin now,” writes Kelly. “Walk and talk and laugh with your friends. But behind the scenes, keep up the life of simple prayer and inward worship.” Offer what you can, and work on the habit of spiritual attentiveness—allow joy, peace, and wonder to fairly burst from you.¹⁵

At first, Kelly acknowledges, there's an alternation between attentiveness to the spiritual dimension and inattentiveness. There are many lapses in our mindfulness, our prayerfulness as we begin. Yet "there is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer."¹⁶

I watch drivers talking on cell phones, making U-turns in city traffic, and marvel at their ability to multitask. It amazes me how people can move through crowds, navigating busy intersections and making the right bus, while their attention seems focused on the BlackBerry in their hands. And then I wonder why I'm surprised that Nell and countless others could maintain a spiritual focus in an urban crowd. Our prayers are secret, in Thomas Kelly's usage, and I like to think of our silent prayers as rising like a cloud above a swarming city street.

Another homeless woman was my teacher. She shared with me an unforgettable image that came to her in dreams as she slept on a mattress, set out with others, on the chapel floor of a Lutheran church. The image came to her until a doctor's medication took away her images and her dreams. Before then, this woman had a persistent vision, a dream of the crowded streets of her city, dim streets, lit by the crowds themselves, with every person wearing a miner's hat with a small lamp on it. The lights, she explained, were from the Spirit of God in each person, and she believed in this light—"the true Light, which lighteth every man" (John 1:9).

This homeless woman had seen miners on television with their lit hats, and she never forgot the sight; it was a mental picture she carried with her thereafter and projected on the cityscape around her. Like Nell, she knew the Bible and remembered the words from John's gospel long after her medication erased her inner visions.

Biblical Crowds

The word *crowd* is derived from the Old English *cruden* or *crode*, both of which signify "a multitude."¹⁷ These words make me think of the

multitudes who gathered to hear the Hebrew prophets in cities and who surrounded Moses as he led God's people out of bondage in Egypt. King David danced in a crowd before the ark of the covenant, and of course, the holy temple, built by King Solomon, was located in the great city of Jerusalem, which attracted crowds of pilgrims.

We would be awed, perhaps, if we allowed ourselves to imagine the throngs of people streaming up the temple mount at the time of the Passover. And these holiday crowds are not the only ones in Scripture.

In the book of the prophet Nehemiah, we read: "And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel.... And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground" (8:1, 6). This is the prayer of a crowd; the prayer of many people, close together, lost in God's praise.

Multitudes

In the gospels, there are also multitudes who seek the Holy. Crowds followed Jesus of Nazareth in cities and towns—including Jerusalem, where, He knew, He would die on the cross: a public death, in the presence of more crowds. During His public ministry, Jesus was called by a humble man in a crowd waiting by the side of the Jericho Road. There (see Mark 10:46), the blind beggar Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus. The crowd tried to silence the beggar, but Jesus heard him and, in the midst of the multitudes, turned and healed Bartimaeus.

The gospel of Mark also notes that the multitudes were so plentiful around Jesus that on at least one occasion He had to stand in a boat to address people. All four gospels narrate the miraculous feeding of more than five thousand people who had gathered in a wilderness place to hear Jesus preach, and yet another crowd gathered to hear the Sermon on the Mount.

Sometimes, as I move through metropolitan multitudes, I try to picture these scenes and remind myself that human nature hasn't changed much in two thousand years. We may dress differently, but we're linked to our spiritual ancestors nonetheless. In a way, we're all part of the same great throng of humanity.

A scriptural story with resonance for me, when I am in a city crowd, tells of a woman who had long been ill. "When she had heard of Jesus, [she] came in the press behind, and touched his garment... [and] she was healed of that plague. And Jesus...turned him about in the press, and said, Who touched my clothes? And his disciples said unto him, Thou seest the multitude thronging thee" (Mark 5:27, 29–31). In such a crush of people, that woman still had the courage and faith to reach out for the Holy.

She is my teacher, an example I keep before me.

I also keep before me a contemporary example of soul touching soul: An attractive woman is standing at the curb of an active urban street. The woman, despite her fine features, lovely hair and clothes, looks unhappy. Her troubled gaze is turned inward. She doesn't hear the voice issuing from a taxi: "Hey, beautiful!"

In the taxi is an older woman of nondescript appearance except for the extraordinary radiance of her smile and her face. She repeats her call.

The younger woman, confused, startled, stares vaguely in the direction of the taxi.

For a third time, the passenger calls out, "I said, you look beautiful!"

The younger woman, the pedestrian, hears the words at last and abruptly changes. The troubled, preoccupied look falls away as if a mask has crumbled. A wide smile illuminates her face.

For a moment, the two women just look at each other, like icons that suddenly match, and then the traffic light changes, the taxi lurches away, and the beautiful woman strides across the street as if she has been transformed by a stranger's generosity.

In that moment, I was reminded that the Holy can come to us right where we are, in the midst of multitudes. We don't have to be in a retreat house to sense God's touch. God can reach through you and me not only

in privacy but caught in a crush of others, on a street, on a highway, in a cityscape.

This is part of everyone's spiritual legacy, everyone's story, and when I reflect on this truth, I must admit that it comes as something of a shock to me. This is not the venue I expected for a spiritual life, but from history's beginnings it has been that way. This came as no surprise to the pilgrims who flooded the roads to the great pilgrimage cathedrals of the Middle Ages; I learned this early in my education when I studied Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Those pilgrims, and today's pilgrims, didn't expect or perhaps even desire privatized spirituality. Not only was there safety in the community but there was a sense of shared spiritual purpose, which we may have lost in our own time. In crowded elevators and on packed subway trains, on buses and highways and streets, I meet the Holy One I seek in others' faces, if I dare to look.

Time Apart

All over the world, spirituality is practiced among city crowds, in the midst of daily life and work. An example of this comes from the teeming streets of a city in India and an iconic figure of modern prayerfulness. Her words may strike a chord with many of us.

"There are some people who, in order not to pray, use as an excuse the fact that life is so hectic that it prevents them from praying. This cannot be," wrote Mother Teresa of Calcutta. "Prayer does not demand that we interrupt our work, but that we continue working as if it were a prayer."¹⁸ Everything we do, then, can be offered to God in a prayerful way.

If you don't feel comfortable with concepts such as breath prayer, try speaking directly to God. Just speak. Tell Him everything; talk to Him. "He is our father," Mother Teresa said. "He is father to us all whatever religion we are."¹⁹

And if we still don't know what to say?

"When we have nothing to give [to God], let us give him that nothingness," Mother Teresa suggested in her book *Everything Starts from Prayer*. "God is always speaking to us. Listen to him."²⁰

However, even Mother Teresa knew the need for some time apart, for solitude and silence. These periods can be worked into our day, a little time apart from crowds and people; it's notable that the Hebrew prophets periodically withdrew from the crowds to deserts or caves for spiritual refreshment. It's equally clear that Jesus often withdrew from the multitudes to pray alone. After a long period of healing crowds of people, Mark's gospel reports: "And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed" (Mark 1:35). The disciples found him there and said, "All men seek for thee" (verse 37).

There are times when all people seem to seek for us too, when needs and demands themselves become the crowd—a multitude of calls, messages, orders, obligations, commitments—and all press in upon us. Perhaps it's then that we too must get up a bit earlier, ahead of our busy world, and create some time apart to pray, before the crowd forms around us again and changes the spiritual dynamic.

"We, too, are called to withdraw at certain intervals into deeper... aloneness with God," wrote Mother Teresa. "To be alone with him... to dwell lovingly in his presence."²¹ Then we shift modes and practice prayer as did Nell and Kelly and as countless people around us may be doing on every street, bridge, alley, and avenue.

Dark and Light

As He sent His disciples out to the towns of Galilee, Jesus warned His followers to be "wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). In city crowds, we too must be both. Sometimes in our age spirituality may be mistaken for weakness. We cannot float down an urban street with our wallets or our purses wide open. Practicing the presence of God doesn't mean we lack common sense in a metropolitan throng. Mother Teresa, ministering and praying in Calcutta, is a good example for me of Jesus's mandate. Her spirituality was gritty, not pretty, as she pulled babies from dustbins and as she continued her prayer life.²²

Crowds, we know well, can have a dark side. Think of those who stoned the prophets in Jerusalem and who nearly pushed Jesus off a cliff in Nazareth. Think of mob rule at various times in urban history in highly civilized countries, including the lynch mobs in our own and in such venerable, beautiful cities as Paris.

We may bear this in mind as we go out into city crowds, which are remarkably orderly, most of the time. And some of the time, they offer us special opportunities for camaraderie. We have enjoyed such scenes televised from the National Mall in Washington DC on the Fourth of July and from cities all over the world on New Year's Eve, where millions of people form congenial crowds.

Awareness of a crowd's potentially dark side does not detract from its many, varied, and rich spiritual opportunities. In fact, such awareness makes it all the more important, I think, that we bring our own spirituality into the street, the freeway, the marketplace. There's something contagious about the peace we can bring to other people by living out of a spiritual grounding ourselves. "Make me an instrument of Your peace," begins the prayer attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi.

And when he cannot feel like the material for such an instrument, J. Brent Bill reminds himself that "the fellow that grabbed the first loaf of bread with its freshly baked aroma is standing in front of me, smiling at his young son. The young woman who cut me off on the freeway could be my daughter as surely as she is someone else's."²³

Transcendent Moments

Occasionally, something happens in an urban crowd that transcends the ordinary. Sometimes there's a moment of grace that seems like divine intervention and, in a flash, lifts everyone's spirituality.

In 2007, on a packed subway platform in New York City, an epileptic man fell onto the tracks. In the few seconds before an oncoming train roared into the station, a man came from the crowd and threw his body over the epileptic man. The train rushed over them both, while the hero of this hour held the trembling man still in the small space just beneath

the bottom of the subway cars. This action saved a life, made the evening news, and inspired a city.

Wesley Autrey, the man who intervened, later said that anyone would do what he had done.

Perhaps.

But it's in urban crowds that we are offered such opportunities. Autrey's heroism is prayer turned visible and active.

In the metropolis, with its crowds, we're so frequently challenged to hear again the famous words of Matthew 25:35–36, 40: “For I was a hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.... And the King shall...say unto them..., Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”



*I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be
in my mouth.*

*My soul shall make her boast in the LORD: the humble shall hear
thereof, and be glad.*

*O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together.
I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all
my fears. (Psalm 34:1–4)*

CURES FOR *Soulsickness* IN THE CITY

Stop: Read and Receive

1. How do I feel or not feel energized or overwhelmed by crowded urban streets or shopping districts?
2. In what way do I look at other people in crowds? How can I keep from insulating myself and removing myself from others by staying within my own space?
3. How do I balance necessary vigilance over my personal possessions, such as my wallet or purse, with a compassionate stance toward others?
4. When have I experienced anything like Thomas Merton's "Vision of Louisville"? How did I feel lovingly connected to other people in an urban crowd? How can I be more mindful of my fellowship with others to experience this again or anew?

Yield: Reflect, Journal, or Discuss

5. Begin to see God in each person you pass in a crowd. Practice this slowly for one block, then two blocks, then more.
6. Pray silently in a crowd. Deliberately note when you're too intent on holding your own in an urban setting.
7. Look over a packed concert hall or a line at a movie theater and pray a blessing on the people gathered with you.
8. Ask yourself: Is it easier for me to pray for the vulnerable people in a crowd (the elderly, the homeless, children) than it is for me to pray for those who look well off and well dressed?

Go: Experience and Engage

9. In city crowds, imagine how you're connected invisibly to those around you.
10. When you're walking downtown or in urban settings, try this mental exercise: imagine being part of a crowd swarming around Jesus. Do you behave differently? Is your attitude different? Note these times in a journal.
11. Formulate your own breath prayer, that simple prayer or heart cry that can be said in a single breath while walking, riding in an elevator, or waiting for a light to change or the train to come. Write a list of breath prayers.
12. When you feel small and anonymous in a city crowd, remember, and repeat silently, God's words to Isaiah: "I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine" (43:1). Write this on a file card and put it in your pocket so you can recall the scripture through the day.



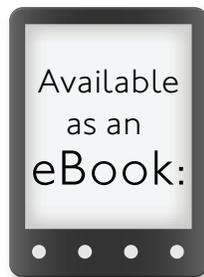
WATERBROOK MULTNOMAH
PUBLISHING GROUP
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

Want to keep reading? You've got options:

Purchase a copy direct from the publisher or from your favorite retailer:

BUY NOW

Download a copy for your eReader and keep reading right away:



amazonkindle

Google
books

iBooks

nook
by Barnes & Noble

And More...