

Recently I was reading a book about contemplation. The author was making the point that praying in this way is not a technique but a spiritual practice that simply disposes us to allow something to take place. I found this insight very helpful. It also makes me think about what we are doing in Spred - disposing ourselves to allow something to take place.

The author of my book than used this wonderful analog of a gardener practicing certain gardening skills that facilitate growth that is beyond the gardener's direct control. The gardener does not actually grow the plants but practices finely honed skills such as watering, feeding, weeding, cultivating soil and pruning. There is nothing the gardener can do to make the plants grow. However, if the gardener does not do what a good gardener is supposed to do, the plants are not as likely to flourish. In fact, they may not grow at all. Gardening involves skills of receptivity. The skills are necessary but by themselves insufficient. (1)

And so it is with the spiritual life and contemplative practice. And so it is with the Spred method.

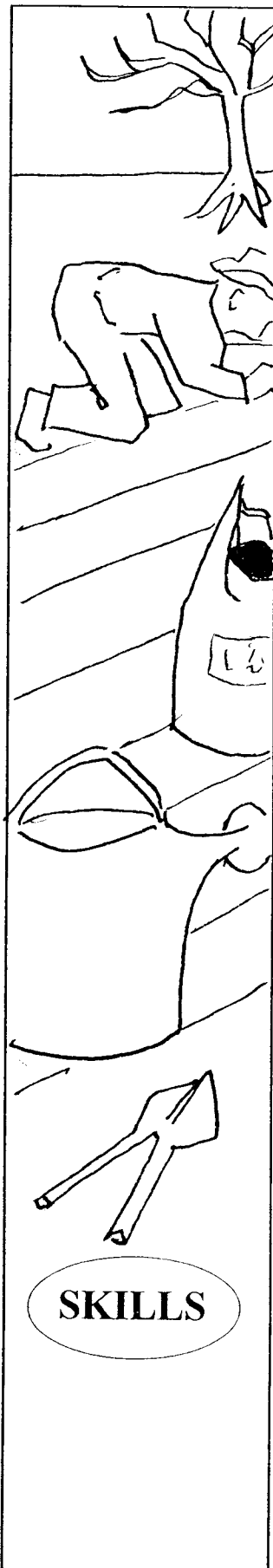
Reflecting on this makes me ask the question: what skills do we need to nurture in Spred to allow the Divine Gardener room to work? Or, to use the words of Pope John Paul II: What facilitates the encounter with the person of Jesus? (2)

As I contemplated this question, I began to be aware of different skills that are first presented at Spred initial training and then enriched and deepened through on-going training. Like the gardener, the more we are involved in the practice of the skill, the more we are aware of the harmony between human effort and divine grace. God is always Self-giving: it is a question of removing the obstacles that make it difficult to receive this Self-gift.

I would like to ponder four skills that nourish receptivity at Spred.

Skill of creating sacred space: If the gardener does not choose a place that receives light and has soil that is arable, it will be difficult to grow anything. So it is with Spred. The group has to identify a place that is suitable for a sacred encounter. The environment must be right for symbolic catechesis to flourish. The parish hall might be free on the night desired but if the boy's football team is meeting next to it, there may never be the possibility of creating silence necessary to hear that "still small voice."

Just last week, five first year seminarians visited our Spred Training Centre in Glasgow. It was



their first encounter with Spred. After they had been there only a short time, I asked them how they had felt coming into the building. They said they were touched by its warmth, peace and serenity communicated through color, lighting and the people. I told them that is how our friends feel when they arrive for a Spred session, welcomed and touched by the environment and the people.

The role of the Activity Catechist is so vital at this stage as the one who has gone before to make sure all is ready to greet our guests; all obstacles that would hinder growth removed from the room and filled instead with nurturing activities. Preparing this room can be a back-breaking task; tables to be moved, lights put in place, activities taken from store rooms to be displayed attractively. If we lose sight of the vision or if we don't work together these tasks become too onerous and standards fall. We know that when we are happy to be together Jesus is with us. We know that God will "enter into the very marrow of our bones...will sweep upon us like a bird of prey to consume our whole life, that he may change it into His." (3) We know - the conditions must be right to allow this to happen.

Skill of guiding the inner journey: How does the Activity Catechist help us all make this inward journey? What skills does this involve? I think it is the skill of **guiding** each person to the activity that will foster concentration. In these past few weeks, I have admired how an Activity Catechist guided a friend who was 'quiet' but restless (and who always chose an activity that did not 'engage' her) to the most amazing concentration with colored tissue paper and glue. The transformation was remarkable.

At the beginning of the Spred year, our Glasgow Activity Catechists had an evening of enrichment where they shared and reflected on their role. They then took 'new' activities to their own groups - clay, water, paint - and in my own group I have been astonished at the creativity this simple exercise has brought forth in many catechists. People who always went for something 'safe' are now launching out on to the road of creativity and this road is the pilgrimage inwards.

Through this concentration physical stillness is created and inner silence for "Our greatest need is to be silent before this great God...for the only language God has is the silent language of love." (4) An Activity Catechist who develops this skill is doing something invaluable. The "ground has been prepared, weeded, watered...the growth is over to another power."

Skill of evoking: The catechist in Spred has to become an 'evocateur' - a word coined by Fr. James McCarthy from Spred Chicago, but a word that almost tells us what it means: "one who can evoke." This tremendous skill requires the one who evokes to be experienced in the "ability to see the past vividly while standing in the present - like looking into a personal rear view mirror." (5)

The catechist who can reflect in this way can then 'enable' the friends and other catechists to enter into this process. Our friends can enter into this experience because they can participate in the calling to mind something that has already happened in their past. It is like the gardener digging the soil, allowing it to breathe afresh. This symbolic or participatory knowledge is particularly suited to the person with a learning disability because it is concrete and not conceptual. Everyone "participates" in the knowing. Flowers chosen singly and then put together in a beautiful vase **are** the community gathered together. The picture of an exhausted person sitting

on a chair, head in hands is **me** when I am exhausted and weary. However, the Leader Catechist requires another skill: an awareness of the goal of the session and where the evocation is meant to lead. A nest may be used to evoke beauty or it may be used to evoke belonging. The catechist must be aware of the goal.

Skill of presence: Most of us when we joined a Spred group came with hearts ready to give. We soon learned that the kind of giving in Spred is different from what we had imagined. "Being present" to our friends and to the other catechists in our group is all about **radiating** our solidarity, compassion, our goodness, our unaffected wordless values. I am simply myself. This is what I share.

There is another side, however, to being present which this extract from another book on prayer captures beautifully:

Jesus always remained a small child before His Father, always poor and dispossessed. The one thing in himself to which he draws attention is his meek and humble heart. Jesus is an emptiness into which the Father is always flowing, an unwritten melody waiting for Him to sing.(6)

How wonderful if the quality of our presence in Spred is characterized by the same receptivity. Each person is a kaleidoscope of gifts and talents that we can gaze upon if we have eyes to see. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

Our friends make this so real for us, often drawing us toward profound gospel values. I am thinking of how much I have received from our friends simply in the area of learning to welcome another person. As I have grown in this skill, I have become more and more aware that when I truly welcome someone, I receive in return the hospitality of God.

Yet how hard it is to be so empty, so still, so receptive in the presence of our friends; we have so much to receive, to learn, to ponder before we can understand the word of Jesus: "I give you thanks Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the clever and intelligent people and revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, because that was the way you wanted it to be." (Luke 10: 21)

People often ask me how I know that the Spred Method works. Let's ask our gardener. "How do you know your gardening skills produced fruit?" The answer is simple. We see the flowers. In Spred when we have worked hard on our skills, we too will see signs of what is beyond our control - deep joy, gracious peace, patience, gentleness and tender love.

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(1) Into the Silent Land by Martin Laird

(2) Catechesis in Our Times

(3) Into the Silent Land

(4) Ibid

(5) Fr. James McCarthy: Article on Revelation, Faith and Education in Faith

(6) The Essence of Prayer by Ruth Burrows, page 48

