

Being a Gentle Presence in the World

A. The monastic lifestyle tends over the years to produce people who are gentle in their dealings with others. In our interactions with others, we have the opportunity to show them the compassion and gentleness of the one who said, “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29).

Part of our calling both as Christians and as monastics is to be a gentle presence in the world, not an angry or violent presence. We achieve this quality, this virtue, by standing in the presence of the anguish of the world and standing in the presence of God. By “the anguish of the world,” I mean having a heart that is open to the troubles, sorrows, difficulties, and sins of people and situations around us. Letting the world dump some of its pain on us. By “standing in the presence of God,” I mean that simultaneously we open our hearts toward God. We open to God’s redeeming gaze hearts that are heavy with the anguish of humanity and allow God to heal within us the wounds of the world and fashion a new creation out of all the chaos within us. The final movement is when we turn back once again horizontally toward the world and the people around us to offer them some of the peace of mind and heart that we have been given by God for their benefit.

You can imagine a picture of someone standing at the intersection of the horizontal and the vertical, in other words, at the middle of the Cross. It is dangerous to try being a gentle presence by standing in the intersection surrounded by angry people who are trying to get to wherever they want to go. We are likely to get flattened. A gentle man, or a gentleman, is not highly valued in today’s competitive, dog-eat-dog society. The life of authentic Christian gentleman is going to be counter-cultural.

As for what it was like in previous ages, we have a good description of a Christian gentleman in the nineteenth century in the context of scholars at a university by Bl. John Henry Newman in his book *The Idea of a University* (1852; VIII):

“HENCE it is that it is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain. This description is both refined and, as far as it goes, accurate. He is mainly occupied in merely removing the obstacles which hinder the free and unembarrassed action of those about him; and he concurs with their movements rather than takes the initiative himself.

His benefits may be considered as parallel to what are called comforts or conveniences in arrangements of a personal nature: like an easy chair or a good fire, which do their part in dispelling cold and fatigue, though nature provides both means of rest and animal heat without them. The true gentleman in like manner carefully avoids whatever may cause a jar or a jolt in the minds of those with whom he is cast; — all clashing of opinion, or collision of feeling, all restraint, or suspicion, or gloom, or resentment; his great concern being to make every one at their ease and at home. He has his eyes on all his company; he is tender towards the bashful, gentle towards the distant, and merciful towards the absurd; he can recollect to whom he is speaking; he guards against unseasonable allusions, or topics which may irritate; he is seldom prominent in conversation, and never wearisome. He makes light of favours while he does them, and seems to be receiving when he is conferring. He never speaks of himself except when compelled, never defends himself by a mere retort, he has no ears for slander or gossip, is scrupulous in imputing motives to those who interfere with him, and interprets every thing for the best. He is never mean or little in his disputes, never takes unfair advantage, never mistakes personalities or sharp sayings for arguments, or insinuates evil which he dare not say out. From a long-sighted prudence, he observes the maxim of the ancient sage, that we should ever conduct ourselves towards our enemy as if he were one day to be our friend. He has too much good sense to be affronted at insults, he is too well employed to remember injuries, and too indolent to bear malice. He is patient, forbearing, and resigned, on philosophical principles; he submits to pain, because it is inevitable, to bereavement, because it is irreparable, and to death, because it is his destiny. If he engages in controversy of any kind, his disciplined intellect preserves him from the blundering discourtesy of better, perhaps, but less educated minds; who, like blunt weapons, tear and hack instead of cutting clean, who mistake the point in argument, waste their strength on trifles, misconceive their adversary, and leave the question more involved than they find it. He may be right or wrong in his opinion, but he is too clear-headed to be unjust; he is as simple as he is forcible, and as brief as he is decisive. Nowhere shall we find greater candour, consideration, indulgence: he throws himself into the minds of his opponents, he accounts for their mistakes. He knows the weakness of human reason as well as its strength, its province and its limits. If he be an unbeliever, he will be too profound and large-minded to ridicule religion or to act against it; he is too wise to be

a dogmatist or fanatic in his infidelity. He respects piety and devotion; he even supports institutions as venerable, beautiful, or useful, to which he does not assent; he honours the ministers of religion, and it contents him to decline its mysteries without assailing or denouncing them. He is a friend of religious toleration, and that, not only because his philosophy has taught him to look on all forms of faith with an impartial eye, but also from the gentleness and effeminacy of feeling, which is the attendant on civilization.

Not that he may not hold a religion too, in his own way, even when he is not a Christian. In that case his religion is one of imagination and sentiment; it is the embodiment of those ideas of the sublime, majestic, and beautiful, without which there can be no large philosophy. Sometimes he acknowledges the being of God, sometimes he invests an unknown principle or quality with the attributes of perfection. And this deduction of his reason, or creation of his fancy, he makes the occasion of such excellent thoughts, and the starting-point of so varied and systematic a teaching, that he even seems like a disciple of Christianity itself. From the very accuracy and steadiness of his logical powers, he is able to see what sentiments are consistent in those who hold any religious doctrine at all, and he appears to others to feel and to hold a whole circle of theological truths, which exist in his mind no otherwise than as a number of deductions.”

“A gentleman never inflicts pain,” says Newman. He tries to make everything go smoothly and comfortably for others whom he deals with. That’s the basic principle, the other points are deductions from the principle.

B.) Working with Newman’s description we may say that the opposite of a gentleman—call him a selfish slob, an obnoxious, discourteous Neanderthal, or whatever—is someone who always causes others some pain, discomfort, big or little problems, embarrassments. He is rude, ill-mannered, vulgar, brutish, plowing through life like a bull in a china shop leaving chaos in his wake.

For an example of this personality we may choose a fictional character named José Arcadio in the book *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (trans. Gregory Rabassa; NY: Harper & Row, 1970 13–14) by Gabriel Garcia Márquez, for which he received a Nobel prize in literature.

The scene is a hacienda in Mexico during the days of mourning after someone had died. All was quiet, family members were going about their duties, the cook in the kitchen, a man in his workshop, the lady of the house and her girlfriends doing needlepoint on the front porch. Into that tranquil scene bursts José Arcadio, newly returned from a sailing voyage. The description begins:

“Suddenly . . . someone pushed open the street door at two in the afternoon in the mortal silence of the heat, and the braces in the foundation shook with such force that Amaranta and her friends sewing on the porch, Rebecca sucking her finger in her bedroom, Ursula in the kitchen, Aureliano in the workshop, and even José . . . Buendia under the solitary chestnut tree had the impression that an earthquake was breaking up the house. A huge man had arrived. His square shoulders barely fitted through the doorways. He was wearing a medal of Our Lady of Help around his bison neck, his arms and chest were completely covered with cryptic tattooing, and on his right wrist was the tight copper bracelet of the *niños-en-cruz* amulet [worn to ward off the evil eye and bring blessings on the wearer]. His skin straight like the mane of a mule, his jaws were of iron, and he wore a sad smile. He had a belt on that was twice as thick as the cinch of a horse, boots with leggings and spurs and iron on the heels, and his presence gave the quaking impression of a seismic tremor. . . . He went directly to the kitchen and there he stopped for the first time at the end of a trip that had begun on the other side of the world. ‘Hello,’ he said Ursula stood for a fraction of a second with her mouth open, looked into his eyes, gave a cry, and flung her arms around his neck, shouting and weeping with joy. It was José Arcadio. He was returning as poor as when he had left, to such an extreme that Ursula had to give him two pesos to pay for the rental of his horse. He spoke a Spanish that was larded with sailor slang. They asked where he had been and he answered: ‘Out there.’ He hung his hammock in the room they assigned him and slept for three days. When he woke up, after eating sixteen raw eggs, he went directly to Catarino’s store, where his monumental size provoked a panic of curiosity among the women. He called for music and cane liquor for everyone, to be put on his bill. He would Indian wrestle with five men at the same time. ‘It can’t be done,’ they said, convinced that they would not be able to move his arm. ‘He has *niños-en-cruz*.’ Catarino, who did not believe in magical tricks of strength, bet him twelve pesos that he could not move the counter. José

Arcadio pulled it out of its place, lifted it over his head, and put it in the street. It took eleven men to put it back.”

By way of comment, José lacks the good manners of a gentleman. He has no wish to be gentle in any way. A gentle man thinks of others, so that he will never cause them discomfort. José thinks only of himself and his own comfort. He might be good in a circus, but he would have difficulty adapting to community life in a monastery.

C.) Macho, Wimpy, Gentle

One thing José has in superabundance is *machismo*. He defines the word *macho* (a strong, proud, virile man). He provoked “a panic of curiosity” among the ladies at Catarino’s store. José is a ten on the he-man scale. I presume he was the real thing, but there are some men who project a he-man image while being unsure of their own manliness. They project the John Wayne masculinity, the Marlboro man masculinity—rough, coarse, swaggering, fluent in four-letter words—but behind that front they are not being themselves, their true selves. They are role-playing and doing it more or less successfully. I don’t say that of all he-men, but of some.

At the opposite extreme of the macho spectrum we meet the sissy, also called the wimp. How do we describe a wimp? A wimp is a weak, cowardly person who never takes risks, never stands up for himself against a bully, afraid to assert himself, who may be physically scrawny and weak, *Wimp* is also used as a verb as in “wimp out,” meaning to give up because of fear of failure, as in “unwilling to jump off the diving board.” It may be that a wimp, in refusing to accept a dare, is not really being a timid little mouse but is actually listening to his common sense, preferring the more sensible, reasonable, logical, and safe course of action. He might survive the jump off the diving board but he might not, because he doesn’t know how deep the pool or the lake is. Or because he can’t swim. His decision not to jump is prudence rather than wimpiness. There’s a best seller called *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney that youngsters especially in middle school easily relate to. It’s also a movie. There seems to be a cultural bias against wimps and in favor of the macho type. The culture values and fosters aggressive, assertive, forceful and even violent methods. That’s why there is such a big debate over gun control. In our world, wimps get trampled in the rush. We are all forced to go against our gentler instincts

just to survive. Life is fiercely competitive, a struggle to get to the top of the heap, or even just to hang on to your place and not get knocked down and run over. Wimps don't have much of a chance. We pity them when we see them by the wayside, lying there on the shoulder of the road of life. It's tough luck for them, but we can't stop to help or the same thing will happen to us. We have to keep struggling.

The virtuous medium between the extremes of machismo and wimpiness is the gentleman, the gentle person. A follower of Jesus tries to be gentle without being either a wimp or a he-man. He is not a pious sissy. Gentleness does not diminish true manliness; it adds a luster to manliness. However, gentleness does diminish the false manliness of machismo, the obsession with being a tough guy.

If you permit, I will refer to an insight from psychologist Carl Jung about each human person having both masculine and feminine tendencies called *animus* and *anima* (Latin terms for the soul in both genders). Gentleness is more a function of the anima than the animus. Our anima is the element that cares, that has concern for others to the point of not wanting to cause them grief (pain). The anima wants to make everything cozy [nest-building and nest-furnishing instinct] and everybody comfortable. The animus element in us knows that we cannot please everybody and so tries to repress the anima. Repressed anima doesn't just disappear; it will turn up in warped and twisted forms. If we repress our anima—the feminine spirit within us— she gets her own back by turning to bitterness, making us crabby, nagging, petty, unforgiving, cynical, and complaining.

St Benedict called this attitude “murmuring,” or “grumbling,” and he tried to cast it out of the monastery. “First and foremost there must be no word or sign of the evil of grumbling, no manifestation of it for any reason at all. If however anyone is caught grumbling, let him undergo a more severe discipline” (RB 34.6–7). He forbids it so often, about five or six times, that we can tell he was fighting a losing battle. In RB 2.29–30, two groups of monks are described, one of which may be called the macho monks. These are inclined to be undisciplined and unruly. Benedict advises the abbot to handle them somewhat harshly. The other group could be called the gentle monks who are more obedient, patient, and long-

suffering. These the abbot is advised to motivate toward even greater progress in virtue.

C.) A Gentle Way of Life

- 1) Moving gently through life implies slowing down enough to appreciate everything that comes by. It means taking time for things, for listening to people, for being quiet sometimes and being sociable sometimes, for enjoying nature, taking time for whatever life brings in the course of the day, the feasts that God prepares for us along the way. Along with slowing down goes a gentle touch. How many times, rushing to get here or there, I have knocked something over that I have to stop and put back in place, or broken something, leaving a shambles in my wake. A gentler soul, and body, takes time, for example, to turn the pages of his psalter, or hastily shoving the automatic clutch through its gears, using things respectfully and gratefully. The gentle touch is the non-possessive touch, not grabbing, not clinging, but lightly briefly holding and then letting go, letting be.
- 2) Open heart and ears. A gentle person is usually a good listener. A poor listener does not really hear what the other is trying to say, but wants the other to listen to him instead. There is no real dialogue. What would happen if you tried to listen more than you speak? Would something burst inside you? Film director Steven Spielberg is quoted as saying: “When you listen, you absorb like a sponge, and your life becomes so much better than when you just try to be listened to all the time.”
[<http://christianscience.ca/the-gentle-art-of-listening/>]
Sometimes people interrupt us and we resent it and let them know it, none too gently.

In the RB, the cellerar is described as a gentle person who knows how to listen to inappropriate requests and give a gentle response. As described in RB 31, the cellerar “should be like a father to the whole community. . . . Let him not sadden the brethren. If a brother should make an unreasonable demand of him, the cellerar should not grieve him by a harsh rejection but

refuse the inopportune request with humility and reasonableness.” That is, he should be gentle toward this character who interrupted him when he was busy doing something important. Don't yell or lose patience, don't throw the bum out. Be firm but gentle. Interruptions are a way of life for cellerars and also abbots in a large monastery. The will of God for them is to put aside their own agenda temporarily, listen, and deal gently with whoever interrupts them. This is practicing what could be called “the prayer of interruptions” [Mary Price 312].

Living a gentle lifestyle means taking time for people, listening to them, trying to hear what they may be saying on a deeper level than their words express. Are they trying to fulfill some inner spiritual or emotional need? Gentleness is part of charity to the neighbor.

- 3) The art of seeing gently implies looking at life as gift. A gentle person doesn't fight life, fight reality, but tries to appreciate it even when it's not going the way he would like. He looks for the feasts that God may have prepared to be enjoyed on the way, on the journey through life. Seeing a moonrise or a sunset, or a band of blue in an otherwise overcast sky. These are gifts. You were in the right place at the right time, and what you saw was God's gift to you. Try to cultivate the art of seeing ordinary as well as extraordinary sights as God's gift to you, to be appreciated and to be grateful for. Even snow is beautiful on tree branches and Quonsets, piled up in drifts, carved out by the shape my shovel. See as artists see. Gentle, non-judgmental seeing is important in our relations with our neighbor, whom we are commanded to love as we love ourselves. Somehow, instead of judging, we want to cultivate a gentle compassionate gaze that sees past the external appearance and behavior that our neighbor presents, a gaze that sees through and behind the external and discovers the life-source deep within that person. The inward source of life or spark of life is something divine, and that we can love.
- 4) Lastly, gentleness will let things be as they are instead of forcing, pushing, molding them into shapes that are not natural to them. A gentle lifestyle tries not to force reality to make it fit into my own plans. When a gentle person has to intervene to liberate

someone or something and help it be true to its deepest self, it does so without forcing, guiding gently, not pushing or pounding roughly. They say a good teacher is relaxed and gentle because he/she knows that it is impossible to MAKE people learn. What a teacher can do is arrange an environment in which learning may happen. It IS possible to program peoples' behavior to some extent, but being programed is not the same as learning.

The reason for letting be is that it is a more respectful approach to reality. Living beings are fragile, easy to damage. We have a natural tendency to be gentle in the presence of whatever is vulnerable and delicate. We would by instinct handle a newborn infant with all possible gentleness and respectful care. Don't drop the baby. A gentle person extends that same attitude to everything in life, because he sees the preciousness and precariousness of all that God has made and is sustaining in existence from moment to moment.

The Chinese sage Lao Tzu says: "Let reality be reality; let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like." That may not be the best advice in every circumstance, but it's good advice when there is nothing we can do about the reality we are faced with except accept it and go on from there. Move on with your life. However there are unacceptable situations, realities, that maybe I CAN do something about, and if I can I should. For a small example, if you see something that is broken or not work and you can repair it, then quietly do so. Or a larger example, good rangeland being turned to a weeds because of over grazing, erosion, and dyers woad. Maybe there is something I can do. Even if I cannot singlehandedly completely restore the range, I can and should do my part to restore it in some way. It's like the AA "serenity prayer": "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference. . . . Taking as Jesus did the sinful world as it is, not as I would have it."

D.) Non-Violent Gentleness

1) Jesus is our model, but was Jesus always gentle? “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart” says Jesus (Mt 11:29). Yet he cursed a fig tree that symbolized barren Israel (Mk 11:13–14, 21). He got angry at the Pharisees who would not permit the healing of a man with a withered hand (“Looking around at them with anger and grieved at their hardness of heart” Mk 3:5). Most famously, “he made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables” (Jn 2:15). He was “consumed with zeal for his father’s house.” His anger and his violence cannot be explained away, but we can observe that these responses always fit the situation and were proportionate to the offense, not out of control raving wild.

At the same time when it came to violence inflicted on himself during his passion and crucifixion, we can see in Jesus a model of non-violence. He overcame evil by absorbing and transforming it. He was put to death on the Cross and rose three days later. The gentle Jesus refused to live by the sword as some of his followers wanted him to do, because “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Mt 26:52). Instead of resorting to violence to defend himself, he submitted to being led as a lamb to the slaughter. He surrendered to God’s plan, God’s will, God’s way of bringing about the kingdom, instead of imposing another way, or inaugurating the kingdom by human efforts.

Jesus is the new Moses, and Moses was noted for his gentleness. However, we see in Moses, as we do in Jesus after him, the same co-existence of anger and gentleness. In the Old Testament, gentleness is often translated as *meekness*. In Num 12:3, Moses is described as the meekest man on the face of the earth [“the man Moses was very humble, more than anyone else on earth” NAB Num 12:3]. He earned that description because he was always attuned to the Lord’s presence and his will. Yet we know also that he murdered an Egyptian who was fighting with an Israelite, and later, after threatening Pharaoh with the tenth plagu, he “left Pharaoh’s presence hot with anger” because of Pharaoh’s stubbornness.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for gentleness is *praus*. In Greek culture, gentleness was valued as in “gentleman,” a mild

friendliness as opposed to a person who is bad tempered, brusque, easily angered [TDNT VI 645–651]. Among the gospels, only Matthew uses the word *praus*: “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the land” (Mt 5:5). Meaning that the meek, the gentle, the lowly will be secure. It’s an allusion to Ps 37:11 “The humble shall own the land and enjoy the fullness of peace.”

Matthew’s gospel describes the gentleness of Jesus in several places. We have already quoted the verse: “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29). There is Jesus’ inaugural address in the synagogue of Nazareth where he reads verses from Isaiah about the Servant of the Lord: “He will not brawl or cry out, his voice is not heard in the streets, he will not break the crushed reed, or snuff [quench, blow out] the faltering wick” (Mt 12:20). Finally in 21:5, Mt quotes Zech 9:9 as Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: “Behold your king comes to you in gentleness astride an ass . . .” The Messiah comes as the gentle king of peace, not conquering by war.

St Paul, writing to the Corinthians appeals to them “by the gentleness and kindness of Christ” (2 Cor 10:11). Christ’s gentleness is not softness and weakness but an attitude rooted in the strength of love. When he was insulted and struck, he kept cool; he prayed on the Cross (J 18:22). Because he was gentle, Jesus could caress the children, touch the cheek of the leper, lay his hands on the hurts and sores of the sick (Lk 5:22). There was healing in his gentle touch. Jesus was teaching us by his example to avoid the rough, heavy-handed, abusive touch, teaching us how to move gently through life, doing good and causing no pain to others.

- 2) Moving forward in history to the thirteenth century, we meet the saint who some people say was the one who resembled Jesus more closely than anyone else, St Francis of Assisi. Was Francis always gentle? We know that he preached to the birds in the trees (as depicted in a painting by Giotto), that a rabbit kept hopping up on his lap after he had freed it from a trap and admonished it to watch where it was hopping, and we know that he tamed the fierce wolf of Gubbio by the sign of the cross, and made it promise not to terrorize the town any more. At that stage of his life, Francis was indeed a model of gentleness. However, near the end of his life,

under the pressure of physical pain and emotional stress, that gentleness got stretched very thin. Furthermore, he turned over control of his community to another friar who introduced some mitigations in regard to ownership which infuriated Francis, so that he took to cursing people who opposed his ideas. According to two recent biographies of Francis, one by Vauchez (*Francis of Assisi: Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, Yale UP, 2012) and another by Thompson, O.P. (*Francis of Assisi: A New Biography*, Cornell UP, 2012), Francis after his stigmata was in horrible pain, lying in his dirt-floor cell, shivering from malaria, vomiting blood, his eyes all but blind and oozing fluid. “He scolded and cursed and talked of devils” until death took him in 1226 at age 45. [from “Rich Man, Poor Man,” by Joan Acocella, *New Yorker* Jan 14, 2013, p. 73-74]

My comment is that there is no question Francis was a saint, who suffered and died in agony like Jesus, but unlike Jesus he might not have been totally responsible for his words or actions in those circumstances. He may have lost control emotionally just as he was losing control physically. In his pain, he may have been raving.

- 3) Moving ahead still further in history to the seventeenth century, we have the example of St Francis de Sales (1567–1622). He too is remembered for his gentleness. He wrote: “Nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as real strength.” And “If we must err in one direction or another, let it be in the direction of gentleness.” “When you encounter difficulties and contradictions, do not try to break them, but bend them with gentleness and time.” “When you are at peace and without anger, store up for yourself a supply of gentleness and kindness. Do this by saying all your words, doing all your actions, both small and great, with the utmost gentleness possible.” Francis was a skilled observer of human nature, and he knew how people can tie themselves up in knots from vexation. He writes in *Introduction to a Devout Life*, Part 3, chap 9, “Of Meekness toward Ourselves”: “One of the best exercises of meekness we can perform is that of which the subject is within ourselves, in never fretting at our own imperfections; for though reason requires that we should be sorry when we commit any fault, yet we must refrain from the bitter, gloomy, spiteful, and passionate displeasure, for which many are greatly to blame, who being

overcome by anger are angry for having been angry, and vexed to see themselves vexed; for by this means they keep their heart perpetually steeped in passion; and though it seems as if the second anger destroyed the first, it serves nevertheless to open a passage for fresh anger on the first occasion that shall present itself. Besides, this anger and vexation against ourselves tend to pride, and flow from no other source than self-love, which is troubled and disquieted to see itself imperfect. We must be displeased at our faults, but in a peaceable, settled, and firm manner”

Did Francis de Sales always practice what he preached? He tried. However he was frequently under sharp verbal attack by the Calvinists of the Chablais (near Geneva) where he was trying to re-establish Catholic parishes. “Certain persons had wished that he would sometimes let loose with some words *of vinegar* [against the Calvinists, although Francis de Sales is the one who came up with the proverb ‘Always be as kind and thoughtful as you can and never forget that you can catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than you can with a hundred barrels of vinegar’]. To this he replied: ‘I assure you that whenever I have made use of stinging replies, I have repented of it afterward. Men accomplish more by love and charity than by severity and rigor.’” Nevertheless, even saints can be pushed too far, and in the course of a public instruction he referred to one of the Calvinists as “that stinker!” Stupefied by such language, his listeners immediately blessed themselves with a great Sign of the Cross. [from Andrew Ravier, SJ, *Francis de Sales Sage and Saint*, San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988, p. 88.]

- 4) Next we can look at a Hindu holy man who practiced and taught non-violence so effectively that without an army he forced the British out of India in August, 1947, but it took him thirty years. His name was Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948). His autobiography, *The Story of My Experiences with the Truth*, is worth reading. Gandhi’s word for non-violence was *ahimsa*, a Sanskrit term implying the “non-destruction of life.” It is not total pacifism, because it permits self-defense. Ahimsa is the attitude of gentle compassion and identification with everything that lives, because of the unity of all life. Gandhi probably got this basic notion from his Hindu religion, but he combined it with a principle of his own devising called

satyagraha, meaning “non-violent non-cooperation or peaceful resistance to injustice.” It included civil disobedience. For example, he urged the boycott of all imported British goods and led the Salt March in 1930 to protest British taxes. The British were taxing salt, on which they had a monopoly, but Gandhi taught people how to make their own salt from the ocean, for free [by evaporation]. He also taught them to spin cotton into thread and weave their own cloth and make their own clothes. In his book *All Men Are Brothers*, Gandhi said that Ahimsa was more than non-killing. He expanded the notion of ahimsa to make it something positive. He equated ahimsa with love. Love is life-giving and live-preserving. He said Jesus was the perfect model of satyagraha and ahimsa. Jesus practiced ahimsa in the sense of love of enemies. Gandhi said “Ahimsa is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind.” He believed ahimsa [think “the spirit of gentle love”] is the only force that can overcome hatred and transform the world.

About gentleness, Gandhi said: “In a gentle way you can shake the world.” In his gentle, non-violent way, Gandhi shook up the Raj, the British Rule in India, which inspired British colonies in other parts of the world to assert their own independence, until the British Empire broke into pieces. Gandhi remained influential. He influenced Martin Luther King in tactics of civil disobedience in the 1960s. He influenced Thomas Merton who wrote a valuable book on *Gandhi and Non-Violence* and also an article “The Gentle Revolutionary” [Ramparts, 1964]. Gandhi influenced Cesar Chavez and Desmond Tutu. I do not know whether he continues to inspire people today.

E.) How to deal with feelings of anger.

An angry person is not a gentle person. Anger may be the chief obstacle to gentleness in our behavior. It is a powerful force within us that can be thought of as a highly flammable fuel like gasoline. The power of gasoline can be channeled and directed to a useful purpose or it can be ignited in an explosion that will burn until it is exhausted, used up. Probably almost everyone gets angry, because it is one of the four primary emotions: anger, fear, sadness, joy. “Never go to bed angry; stay up and plot your revenge.”

Anger is a basic human survival instinct that sends adrenalin pumping through our system in preparation for fighting to survive. In that sense anger is morally neutral or good. . We know that it is unhealthy to repress anger, push it back, swallow it. That will only lead to tension, aching muscles, headaches, high blood pressure, irregular heartbeat, physical and mental illness, decreased efficiency, sadness, insomnia, and a potential future explosion. Repressing anger is like holding your thumb over a dripping faucet until the pressure builds up and you can no longer hold it back.

How do people express their anger? Different folks have different ways. Some explode verbally. And/or physically. Maybe they have been told that it's good to ventilate their angry feelings and let it all come out. Others will say or do nothing but instead stuff the anger inside them where it simmers, perhaps for a long time. Sometimes there is an eruption of pent-up anger. Carrying unreleased anger can cause physical problems, as we have said; maybe constipation, maybe ulcers. Some people may try to release anger by going out for a run or a walk or working out.

I think almost everybody gets angry, but the gentle person is not dominated by his anger. One question is: how can anger be moderated and expressed non-destructively, at the right time and place, and in the right measure, before the right persons, as reasonable indignation and not as blind rage?

How can angry people learn to get control of their emotions? People who have quick tempers and a history of aggressive emotional outbursts cannot become gentle people over night. They might have to go to Anger Management Class. These classes teach acceptable ways of coping with anger. They teach how to stop, take a deep breath, count to ten before speaking. They also suggest stepping back mentally in order to view the situation against a larger horizon, including the horizon of God's loving presence and providence. Gradually an angry person may become a less angry person, and then maybe an occasionally gentle person. They are trying to re-program their own genetic makeup, which is not easy. They were born with an irascible temperament. Other people seem to be born with a good-natured temperament, having a natural inclination toward gentleness. It's a long slow process of transformation before an irascible temperament

gets tamed. For some people it is a praiseworthy attainment if after 25 or 30 years of working with this fault, they fly into a rage only half as often as they did originally—three times a week instead of six times.

From a spiritual point of view, God may sometimes permit an irascible person to struggle with his or her temper most of their life in order to help keep them humble. Some of the saints had problems with anger. St Jerome, for instance, had a reputation for being prickly, snappish, combative, sharp-tongued and sharp-penned. His letters, in elegant Latin, sometimes ridicule those who disagree with his opinions.

“The wrath of a man does not accomplish the righteousness of God,” says St James (1:20). Or in another translation: “God’s saving justice is never served by human anger.” We may understand St James to mean wrath that is out of control, a blind frenzy that could lead to murder. Sometimes however, it is okay to express our righteous indignation in an honest, controlled, rational way, out of love, as long as we keep a grip on ourselves and stay within reason. Anger will not destroy a strong relationship of friendship, because afterwards we can apologize, make up, and come together in a stronger relationship. The closer we live with others, the more occasions there can be for outbursts of anger. They know us, know which buttons to push to infuriate us. Where anger becomes even more destructive is where people nurse their anger, keep it alive and simmering, pour more and more energy on it, and let it motivate everything they do relative to a certain person. Mental hospitals have many patients who refuse to let go of their anger and hostility.

The letter to the Ephesians says: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger” (Eph 4:24). And Jesus says, “Whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment” (Mt 5:22). It does not take much to set off an angry reaction in some people. Instead they might try saying, “Let’s talk about it later,” so that they can get away from the situation and cool down. Then when their adrenalin level is down to normal, maybe they can reflect not on what provoked them but on their anger itself. What does it mean? What is going on? What is that angry reaction telling them? Anger is a signal from within. It says there is a message waiting for me. Maybe it would be helpful to talk about the whole thing to a

third party, someone you trust. Then maybe next time something provokes you, you will be capable of a more gentle response instead of an angry reaction.

F.) Gentleness and Taoistic Receptivity

Psychologist Abraham Maslow talks about *Taoistic Receptivity* in much the same way I have been talking about gentleness. We may have to stretch our mental muscles a bit to understand Maslow's thinking, but I think it's worth the effort. *Tao* means *way*, the way of life, the life-rhythm of the cosmos that is present everywhere yet undefinable. To be in harmony with Tao, to dance with it, we need a playful receptivity, a spontaneous way of acting and perceiving in every unique situation. For example, when we are at a concert or visit an art museum, we are more likely to keep our eyes and ears open and our mouth shut, letting the music or the art be itself and giving in to it, receiving it into our being.

Maslow sees the heart of Taoistic receptivity as non-interfering in the way things are, non con-controlling, non-intruding. It is a gentle letting-things-be-as-they-are in my presence. Then he goes further and says, "I can go over from a bare *permitting* 'it' to be itself, to a loving, caring, approving, joyful *eagerness* that it be itself, as with one's child or sweetheart or a tree or poem or pet animal." All those objects tend to call forth a gentle response from us anyway. We want them to become fully themselves, and we appreciate them as they are. Furthermore, we gently help them to become the best they can become in the future.

Taoistic receptivity, like gentleness, values listening. The gentle person is alert, all ears, listening to the delicate human and spiritual meanings of a situation or event or conversation. He listens gently to all of reality, all the facts and data, so as to hear from them what they are, what they need, and what he ought to do in the situation. Gentle listening is hushed, patient, receptive, non-interfering, "respectful of the matter-in-hand, courteous to the matter-in-hand."

Gentleness stands receptive and accepting in the presence of the mystery of things and people. In his relations with others, the gentle person tends to be more respectful, less violent, contemptuous, overbearing, less prone to press on others his own opinions or philosophies or tastes in music, art, food, spirituality, politics. He is less concerned with

disciplining, training, shaping, inhibiting, restraining, setting guidelines for others, and more concerned with their personal preferences, their basic good will and natural intentions to do better, their spontaneity and creativity, their self-fulfillment. As long as they are not doing themselves or others any harm, he lets them be and helps them be the best they can. He lets them learn by trial and error, if its not too expensive. [last part from *Motivation and Personality* 2nd ed]

In his book, *Psychology of Science*, chap 10, "Taoist Science and Controlling Science," Maslow says:

"In any case, what can you do with the "way things are", with the sheer suchness of the world and of the things in it - granting, of course, that you are not frightened by it all (as many people are)? About the only thing you can do when you are passively receptive and accepting is to wonder at it all, contemplate it, savor it, marvel at it, be fascinated with it - hopefully, enjoy it. That is, the thing to do is to do nothing. This is about the way children experience the concrete world, intently, absorbed, spellbound, popeyed, enchanted. In peak experiences and in desolation experiences, too, some version of this gluing to the world can happen. For the moment, at least, we don't have to do anything about multiplicity; we can just experience it receptively, Taoistically, contemplatively. It doesn't at once have to be explained, classified, theorized about, or even understood (except in its own terms). . . . The word and the concept "contemplation" can, then, be understood as a form of nonactive, noninterfering witnessing and savoring. That is, it can be assimilated to Taoistic, nonintruding, receptivity to the experience. In such a moment the experience happens instead of being made to happen. Since this permits it to be itself, minimally distorted by the observer, it is in certain instances a path to more reliable and more [truthful] cognition."

G) Gentleness and Playfulness: Dancing to the Rhythm of the Cosmos

In his book *Spirituality and the Gentle Life*, Adrian van Kaam has a chapter [XXII] on "Gentleness and Playfulness" in which he says that "Gentleness places playfulness at the heart of the spiritual life." What does van Kaam mean by that statement? Playfulness?

I thought the spiritual life was a serious business. St Benedict surely frowns on playfulness in the sense of levity, buffoonery, compulsive joking around. Isn't playfulness one of the things we left behind with Santa Claus and the tooth fairy? Children play; adults work, or else they starve.

Then we remember something from the Gospel about becoming like little children. If playfulness belongs to children and if childlikeness is the path to sanctity, then playfulness is at the heart of the spiritual life. Divine wisdom, according to Prv 8:30–31, “was beside him as an artisan. I was his delight day by day, playing before him all the while, playing over the whole of his earth, having my delight with human beings.” Wisdom invites us to lay aside the heavy burden of our seriousness, become again like little children, and join her in the dance of life. Gentleness is the spirit of surrender and openness, of playfully letting go. It is the gift of the divine and gentle Spirit who dwells in our heart. That is the spirit of Jesus who said, “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29).

H) Conclusion

We have looked at the attitude of gentleness as it plays out in the lives of many different people, including Jesus himself. We have taken as a working definition what Blessed John Henry Newman said, that a gentleman is “one who never inflicts pain.” We have also considered the opposite of gentleness, as a person who causes discomfort and disruption wherever he goes and whatever he does.

As a monastic attitude, gentleness softens our sharp, aggressive, irascible edges and helps us be a gracious presence in the world.

Gentleness helps us in many of our relationships:

- 1) towards inanimate objects. For example the way we treat tools or machinery, the way we treat the land and the environment.
- 2) Towards other people. Making them comfortable, being hospitable, respectful. Practicing gentleness toward obnoxious people, or toward people interrupting me. Even gentleness toward sinners, admitting “there but for the grace of God am I.” St Bernard recommends “compassionate tenderness toward sinners and not an angry severity” (SC 44.4, Kalamazoo, p. 227).
- 3) Being gentle as a citizen of the US or as a Catholic toward other countries, toward people of different ethnic or religious persuasion.

Non-violence, non-aggression, acknowledging their needs and rights as human beings.

- 4) Finally, in our relationship with God. It doesn't work to try to be domineering and controlling with God. It doesn't work to expect God to fit into our timetable, or expect him to answer every petition immediately.

So we have learned that gentleness includes social grace and sensitivity but is basically a spiritual attitude of respectful openness to the mystery of God's presence and action in our life and the world around us. Cultivating a gentle approach to life, not a domineering one, enables us to let things happen according to God's purpose. A gentle approach flows with the way God is running the universe. It goes along with the divine plan for restoring all things in Christ and bringing them all into the unity and peace of his kingdom.

[end]