Opinion
EarthBeat



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Contemplative prayer has always been an important part of my life. Climate activism is rather new to me.

The experience that drew me in was not a storm or a heat wave, but a demonstration a few years ago against a refinery in a poor neighborhood in Philadelphia. When the leader asked how many people had friends and family who had gotten cancer, just about everyone in the room raised their hands.

I later discovered that my retirement money was being invested in funding similar businesses in many places around the country and world that cause pollution and climate change! I learned a local Quaker group, Earth Quaker Action Team, encourages Vanguard, an asset manager, to influence corporations to divest from fossil fuels. Many have risked arrest to get the attention of this huge corporation.

Related: I prayed with Quakers to urge Vanguard to invest more responsibly

What have I done? Read Pope Francis' encyclical on care for our common home, *Laudato Si*', slowly develop a simpler lifestyle, drive less — and pray.

Climate work can be daunting. Where do we find the wherewithal to persevere in this long-term work that requires dramatic change in all of us and in the systems around us? How do we engage barriers against such change? Could my relationship with God and the church be helpful, or even instrumental, in supporting my climate activism?

Yes. My contemplative prayer life makes me more sensitive to the presence of a generous, loving God in creation and is a source that sustains me in the mission of ecological conversion and climate action.

Contemplation is a form of prayer that focuses on silence and openness to the presence of a higher power. It teaches me to sit with nature and God, to gaze at God's world and to feel my breath — all of which remind me how dependent I am on creation and God's sustaining power. I learn from the stillness of the trees that my world is rich and my life is full, if I am present to it and care for it.

Praying this way leads to an awareness that I need the Earth to survive.

Furthermore, practices that help overcome difficulties in contemplation can be applied to overcome barriers that activists encounter in their work. In both the spiritual world and the world of activism, feelings of resistance are often a sign that

we have run into something that needs attention.

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This requires us to sit with the feeling and be patient to find what's beneath it. Is it fear or anger or hurt or embarrassment? We need to consider ways to face the cause of that resistance and take steps to overcome it.

Some people choose to believe misinformation that supports their opinions. Contemplation helps us slow down and discover with self-compassion how we may be fooling ourselves about something that may not be true, and why. Then we can let go of our need to hold on to falsehoods and can better see what is true. We can extend this same compassionate understanding to others.

Rather than get angry or confused, a contemplative approach can unearth underlying assumptions. There may be fear or helplessness or cynicism at work. Without berating ourselves or insulting others, contemplation can help us face personal assumptions. It gives us the freedom to ask questions that challenge our opinions and to consider a different way.

On the contemplative path and in the field of activism, there are times of feeling paralyzed and alone. One can feel helpless and unable to change themselves or the world. In those moments, self-compassion encourages us to accept those feelings as real and realize that we can share our grief with a God who grieves too.

But we also must refuse to believe that what we are experiencing is more powerful than the infinite power of love that sustains us. In contemplation, we practice trust and patience through difficulty, and can apply this also to our activism work.

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Powerful corporations, apathetic politicians, and people who are overwhelmed or intimidated by the magnitude of contemporary issues can seem impossible barriers

to overcome in climate activism. Burnout is an occupational hazard.

The wisdom of contemplation says to step away, to accept the feelings but to not let them hold tyranny over your heart, and to find a supportive community where shared experience can help sustain each other.

I am trying to be involved in my parish's climate activism efforts. This can include direct service to remediate damages caused by the burning of fossil fuels, advocacy to change laws and systems that allow or encourage the use of fossil fuels, organizing groups and coalitions together around climate change, or nonviolent resistance against groups and corporations perpetrating the destruction of the environment.

All of our activities are done with the awareness that we are working with God's Spirit and in solidarity with all of creation.

May we embody nature's gifts of strength, wisdom and joy in our work to sustain it, as with St. Paul we pray, "All creation groans for redemption until now. And not only it, but we ourselves also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit — we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption of children, the redemption of our body" (Romans 8:22-23).

This story appears in the **Small Earth Stories** feature series. View the full series.