

Polupragmon or on Being a Busy-Body

Essays posted on this Lectio Divina site pertain to various aspects of the spiritual life. Each is an attempt to highlight certain elements from a personal point of view, and I am aware that they leave much to be desired. At the same time I obtained much pleasure writing them, and perhaps a few salient points they have in common can be singled out for development, a project to consider in the future. And so, the current essay is the latest installment, if you will, which deals with what we might call the Bottom Line to all spiritual practices. Of special interest is coming to grips with this Bottom Line here and now, not just theoretically. I use the phrase to describe what we encounter once we've exhausted all our resources and how we act when we have our backs up against the wall. It connotes desperation, not exactly the most pleasant subject to discuss, but is part and parcel for anyone pondering where we came from, why we are here and where we are going. Such are traditional questions we associate with philosophical inquiry. At the same time they have theological overtones, for originally both disciplines are indistinguishable as far as real life is concerned.

I've decided to divide reflections upon the Bottom Line according to two general themes which will be considered consecutively: 1) cultivating awareness of one's sinfulness or more to the point, holding before one's eyes as continuously as possible those shameful acts we are afraid to admit even to ourselves, and 2) discovering an antidote to the continuous stream of thoughts that afflict us. This stream rests largely upon the memory of things we'd rather forget but cannot since they nag at our conscience. Of course, we get a respite here and there yet feel these mental pangs most strongly when attempting to quiet our minds as a preparation for contemplative prayer. That's because we have decided to engage in an activity diametrically opposed to this mental flow. The Greek word entitling this essay, *polupragmon*, or the undue concern over people, things and events, is a negative manifestation of how we incarnate these memories. I chose this term, difficult to translate adequately, because it is so vivid and right to the point. *Polupragmon* is a compound word: *polus* or many and *pragma* (from which we get "pragmatic") or deed. The verb for the latter is *pragmateuomai*, to be engaged in business, so it has a this-worldly feel about it. Thus the combination of these two words gives us something like to be busy about many things, not unlike Jesus' rebuke to Martha: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious (*merimnao*: to be concerned, have care) and troubled (*thorubazo*: to cause trouble, to be distracted) about many things; one thing (*henos*) is needful" [Lk 10.41]. Jesus does not specify the nature of this *henos* but says that Martha's sister, Mary, has chosen it as her "good portion" (*meris*) which "shall not be taken away from her." That antidote mentioned in #2 is one way of looking at the "good portion" which will come a bit later. As for *polupragmon*, a better way of translating it is being meddlesome or downright nosy about matters which don't concern us. Such nosiness has its roots in thoughts which later come to birth in actions. The word has an air not only of curiosity but of potential trouble which results from poking around where we shouldn't. Several important references describing *polupragmon* in Plato's Dialogues are found at the end of this essay in order to give the reader some insight as to its context.

As for the two general approaches concerning the Bottom Line, the first one relates to cultivating awareness of what we'd prefer to consign to oblivion. Recollection of a past embarrassment initially demoralizes us, but we can overcome it instead of wallowing in its presence. First impressions are daunting which compel us to give close scrutiny as to the source of intimidation in order to overcome our resistance to confronting our shame stemming from past behavior. The second approach bears a remarkable parallel to the normal rise and fall of thoughts and images within our minds but is completely different from it. That's why I single it out for exploration. This will be done through an examination of transliterated Greek terms in a passage from the (apocryphal) Book of Sirach. In the final analysis, the two aspects of the Bottom Line work together in a salvific fashion by those who take up either practice or combine elements of both. Actually, a person can implement the two without bringing them into conflict.

If we lacked conscience, there would be no problem about being bothered by painful memories. We would go along merrily with disregard for what our consciences tell us and live in blissful ignorance. However, that is not the case for a lot of people who are dissatisfied with the lowest common denominator, always is a temptation. To a certain extent, we all live in blissful ignorance due in part to our materialistic culture which inures us against the exertion demanded by self-reflection. This makes it difficult to conceive freedom from

bothersome thoughts because rarely do we find a person to guide us. Sometimes word of this freedom gets down to us through contacts with gifted people, reading or listening to a lecture or sermon. In most cases the effect is fleeting, and we continue along on the same plane as before. Our resources remain scattered instead of being focused. Then there's the question of how we'd comport ourselves once we've achieved the freedom, the fruit of spiritual discipline. Little discussion is to be had on the matter. It is lacking because few persevere beyond the initial stages of their spiritual search which makes the challenge to continue quite daunting. We recognize that freedom exists out there but have little endurance to maintain our presence within it. Just as rare is the presence of persons who can diagnosis our situation properly. Instead we have a partial type of knowledge of that land lying beyond the veil of thoughts and memories. If we could gather it up and develop it further, we would obtain the capacity for perseverance. I might add by footnote that over the past year or so I had a number of conversations with Catholic priests who claimed that the bulk of their work consisted in ministering to the basics of religion. Not only that, they did this repeatedly for many years which wore them down. More than one of these good priests even wondered if there was more to religion than these basics, that is, the usual prayers and talk about rules, etc. They knew there was but would never pick it up from their ministry.

At the heart of the challenge of dealing with the incessant flow of our mental life lies an attachment to them...not especially all but those which appeal to us. Realization that the flow never stops at first is embarrassing, for we discover that we're more attached to this flow than we'd like to admit. Unprejudiced acknowledgment in this regard sets us on more solid ground enabling us to proceed despite the fact that thoughts and mental images will continue to parade before our minds. Actually such thoughts are part and parcel of being alive, so they shouldn't be seen in a negative light. Over time we come to recognize that despite the supreme value of our mental faculty, we're endowed with something better, namely, the capacity not to think, or to put it better, the capacity to transcend thinking. A bit odd to state it this way, but further inquiry into our human nature reveals this non-thinking faculty (for lack of a better word) is our highest capacity. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer has some interesting stuff to say about this (he used the word "perception" as coming before rational thought), but here is not the point to discuss it, only make passing reference to him.

The usual approach in dealing with distractions is if we can't eliminate them, we should strive to keep them at a minimum. This assumes reliance upon various disciplines which run all the way from the repetition of a holy word or mantra to allowing thoughts to flow at will and not being bothered by them. All have value, depending upon the mood and disposition of the person adopting the method. If we read accounts left by holy people, we discover revealing, painful complaints about how they handled thoughts, a fact which surprises some people, given the fact that these gifted persons have practiced meditation for many years. On some occasions we read that they have been overwhelmed with an onrush of thoughts to the point of attributing the attacks to diabolical influence. This might be pushing it somewhat, but for most folks it rings a sympathetic bell as they struggle on a less intensive level. Thoughts and images morph into distractions only when we examine them head on; otherwise no problem. So in a way, we shouldn't be surprised at what is transpiring, quite natural when viewed objectively. Recently I discovered a verb that well describes this merciless assault, "to spew" which has kinship with *polupragmon*, undue busyness. I looked it up online and got the following (disgusting!) synonyms, many of which are related to the stomach: to belch, bring up, cascade, disgorge, eject, eruct, erupt, expel, flood, gush, heave, irrupt, puke, regurgitate, scatter, spit, spit up, spread, spritz, throw up, vomit. While these words pertain to physical phenomena, they are applicable for describing what happens when our thoughts and imagination run wild. They are always in turbulent motion, are ready to spring into high gear at a moment's provocation and put up a fierce resistance when we attempt to bridle them.

If we are courageous enough to overcome our innate reluctance and shame at examining this spewing process, we discover that beneath its many disguises lies a prosaic fact, namely, monotonous repetition. The same familiar images and thoughts crop up over and over again, albeit in different guises. Chances are high they are built upon a particular traumatic experience as opposed to a whole bunch of them. While the trauma may have taken place many years ago, the passage of time means little; it seems to have occurred just yesterday. The same applies with positive thoughts and images though this seems less likely. We have an inclination for negativity well described by the Latin term *curva* (curve) used by some early Cistercian authors. However,

what curves down has the capacity for curving up, if you will; this symbol holds out the possibility for restoring our human nature. Becoming aware of the sameness of the spewing process is a critical insight: by looking straight into its monotonous nature it lessens its grip and we are less susceptible of being captivated by thoughts and images which impinge upon our awareness. All this monotonous stuff shares the character of *curva*, a downward trend. What earlier had plagued us is revealed, now finally stripped of its formidability and reduced to a less threatening image, the *curva*, with its two directions, down and up. No doubt the monotony will remain, but at last we have a handle on what earlier had appeared as a multiple, hydra-headed reality. We don't have to juggle multiple forms of spewing since we've managed to boil them down to one...*curva* with its downward accent...and probe impartially at their essential nature.

Once we've gotten acquainted with this reduction from multiplicity of thoughts and images and have reduced it to one general type of spewing, the force of its issue decreases considerably. You might say we reached the bottom of the *curva*, knowing that our point of origin lay on the top of it and that we can return there. We've singled out one embarrassing memory which for a good bulk of our lives had produced an infinite number of images and reduced them to a minimum. Technically speaking, this reduction may be designated a trick. By that I mean we are capable of accomplishing what previously had seemed impossible: plant a given shameful recollection into our minds shed of its multiplicity without this multiplicity getting out of hand. Now we can keep its memory alive more easily without fear of being afflicted by it. The reduction of multiple thoughts and emotions to one or two does keep us attuned to embarrassing memories but in a wholly different way. They have become a living presence, a constant welcome companion, and by reason of their singularity, are a secret weapon in our struggle at controlling thoughts and emotions. Just one ignominious thought or image from the past is a gatekeeper allowing our minds to function unencumbered from harmful recollections. We are in a position to use what had afflicted us to afflict the afflictions...in other words, actively go after them.

Where have all those embarrassing spews gone? Our gatekeeper retains its form but not its power to disgrace and therefore arrests the emergence of uncontrolled thoughts and images. Memory of this form doesn't disappear completely: chances are it will hang around a long time though defanged of its once powerful hold over our lives. The very thought of what had dishonored us becomes an ally in warding off other thoughts which threaten our new-found peace. The working of this process occurs at a subtle, deep level, very hard to explain adequately. In fact, little or nothing seems to have been written on the subject. It can be found, however, by reading in between the lines of spiritual authors, if you will, beneath the multiple layers of culture and language. One notable example may be found in from St. John's Gospel, Jesus after his Resurrection which has become celebrated among mystics and authors of devotional books. He retained the scars of his crucifixion but in a wholly different form.

It's virtually impossible to put into words how this trick works, just that it does and does so effectively. We achieve awareness of it more by perception than by intellect and see the process verified by the joy it bestows upon our lives. However, we do know one overriding fact: that which once had haunted us has become our ally. The transformation of earlier experience of embarrassment arising from thoughts and images to a singular form endows us with what the ancient Greeks called *parresia*, frankness or openness of speech belonging to the member of a city-state or *polis*. St. Paul puts *parresia* in New Testament terms: "(Christ Jesus our Lord) in whom we have *boldness* and confidence of access through our faith in him" [Eph 3.12]. *Parresia* seems too good to be true, that we can express ourselves freely without recrimination. Since God is involved, that means we can do it at any time and in any situation: no restrictions apply, something hard to get our minds around. Because the pursuit of things spiritual has an implicit overlay of seriousness about it, a perception very hard to shake, *parresia* obscures what can be described as a humorous dimension. For example, when sitting quietly for prayer we experience the usual distractions. They are of the garden variety, nothing special, but devolve quickly into a spew governed by those embarrassing thoughts and images mentioned above. Then we behold...taking everything in like a snapshot and without being judgmental...the process as goes its merry way (*parresia* is a direct result of this beholding). Immediately our attention is caught by the incredible unmanageableness of this spewing which evokes a chaotic scene from a slapstick movie or a cartoon. Becoming aware of this distinctive feature signals an advancement in our understanding. Language fails to explain the wonder adequately, yet the experience is genuine by reason of the positive change it effects in the person beholding it. Some mysterious release of energy previously unrealized has opened up

new doors. From what I gather, spiritual authors have little to say about this phenomenon. Surely they must have been aware of it; perhaps the constraints of their societies and cultures made them hesitant to write about it. Anyway, the experience is genuine, and it's crucial to maintain alliance with our new-found friend which brought about this miracle in the first place. The miracle, of course, consists in what had afflicted us has become a gatekeeper...a guardian...in sharp contrast to its previous incarnation. There it was characterized by spewing whose very hint of its presence was enough to shake us to the core.

There's a Greek word with philosophical and theological implications that may help us get a hold of this transformation from incessant spewing to beneficial gatekeeper. In most article on this Home Page I've dealt with various aspects of it and do so yet again. That term is *anamnesis*, difficult to translate, but corresponds to recollection which is more inclusive than the memory we may have of a given person, event or thing. Theologically, *anamnesis* is that part of the Mass known as the consecration ("Do this in *memory* of me") which for Catholics is the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. That is to say, this presence is effected through a specific form of memory which sounds awkward in English but is perfectly fine in Greek. For purposes specific to this article I incline more to the philosophical dimensions of *anamnesis* but do have in mind the theological ramifications as applicable to spirituality. At the end of this article are posted several uses of *anamnesis* in the philosophical sense as used by Plato which may help flesh out the concept. The purpose of these citations is to show from a reliable source the very different import memory had not just for Plato but for the ancients as a whole, including early Christians who drew heavily from him. *Anamnesis* isn't some mental container we keep in mind constantly as we do with the memory of a person or event. If this were so, *anamnesis* as perceived in terms of our thoughts and images about it would sprout up just as incessantly as that mental spew we've been discussing. We would be engaging in self-deception because the two would have little or no difference. Rather, we are dealing with a presence...not in the way another person or even God may be present to us...but a presence which functions as a mediating element. *Anamnesis* makes its presence felt not by our own efforts but after we've seen the futility at tampering with a reality not subject to manipulation (a good example of *polupragmon* at work!). Perhaps *anamnesis* is akin to an angelic reality, keeping in mind that the definition of an angel is one who is sent. Thus *anamnesis* may be understood as that-which-has-been-sent to us after we've exhausted our psychic resources...rarely beforehand...though we may get an inking here and there of its presence. The characteristic of sending makes *anamnesis* a gift, gratitude being the most typical response we have for recognizing this faculty.

Another way to understand the unique presence of *anamnesis* is by perceiving it as a form devoid of content, which is very different from a conventional of memory. *Anamnesis* as form is not a ghostly entity enclosing something equally vague. Rather, in the context of this essay, it is that form of a particular embarrassing memory discussed above. It remains with us while its contents...the images and thoughts which give birth to a plethora of emotions, etc...now lack power to impact us. Consider this from personal experience. The new guest we've invited to carry around with us (actually *anamnesis* is part and parcel of our humanity, only we haven't been aware of it) is located squarely in our memories. In fact, *anamnesis* is a recollective faculty or the broader reality underpinning our memories. Yet by reason of being devoid of content, it wards off potential incoming negative influences. The content from such input bumps into the form of *anamnesis*, so to speak, and discovers nothing on which to fasten itself. The form itself does the warding off, not the contents; if this form consisted of contents, both they and the mental stuff coming at us would be cut from the same cloth. Even though *anamnesis* is a powerful ally, thoughts and images continue because it is the mind's nature to work blindly on its own terms and schedule. However, what our minds produce now resemble snowflakes which evaporate upon a hot surface upon contact.

I have attempted to demonstrate how embarrassing memories may be transformed by expelling their troublesome content while retaining their form, by recognizing these forms as a type of *anamnesis*. Now we should see if an antidote exists to nullify the continuous stream of thoughts and images that assail us. Going at it alone minus some external aide won't do if we wish to succeed. Here we hit upon a less explored path, if you will. Traditional methods of recollection are fond of employing a sacred word or focusing upon an event of Christ's life which is perfectly fine. The method at hand differs by reason of making a conscious gesture to align our normal mental spew with a process that parallels it...not unlike two railroad tracks that run parallel to

each other without merging. At the same time both sides are in constant touch. By no means is this aide a spiritual spew, one on a higher level, but is analogous to the continuous gush of mental images and thoughts. At first glance this may seem odd, even unbecoming, to associate something good with what we prefer to hide, but it turns out to be very attractive. The natural stream of mental activity which always will dog us does negate this activity, for it consists in a different form. The big difference, however, is that this form has contents we welcome and absorb. It recognizes that our minds and imaginations are uncontrollable insofar as spewing goes yet directs this unceasing process in a different direction.

The antidote I have in mind is a passage lifted from Scripture. Here we are not dealing with “how to do” *lectio divina* which, quickly defined, is the slow, meditative reading of Scripture with an eye towards using the text...even a single word...as a vehicle for silent, image-less prayer. In the context of this essay I am concerned with a particular aspect of *lectio* as a way to counter that spewing experience described in the first half of this essay. To best demonstrate this is to single out an example, a passage taken from the Book of Sirach (NB: Sirach belongs to the Apocrypha and was written in Greek; I cite from the RSV translation). The following paragraph is of special value for the task at hand, so I give it with transliterated Greek words followed by a detailed explanation. Actually, explaining these Greek terms is what this second half of the essay is all about, of how we can get into the spirit of the text. Of course, this can be extended to the rest of Scripture, especially through the original languages, for they enhance the meaning like nothing else. Such an approach isn't beyond the scope of anyone wishing a deeper understanding of the text, for it can be spelled out clearly through close attention to the transliterated text. Then and only then can we see the text's intricacy. Thus we have a mirror of the *polupragmon* of common experience and elevate it to a new level. Since we've familiar with the constant assault of thoughts and images, transferring the busyness within us to a higher plane makes us realize that using *lectio divina* in this fashion comes more naturally than first imagined. While reading Sirach, keep in mind that so many words have an air of that busy-bodyness about them. Quickly we discover the relative ease at transferring our innate complexity...through the mediation of Scripture's complexity...to a different plane. There, despite the appearance of complexity, an understanding of the terms simplifies our minds and hearts, thereby making us less susceptible to inner turmoil. And so let's take a look at that passage from Sirach (14.20-7). The text is given in three parts: transliterated words in parentheses within the English translation to give an overall feel, a list of the same transliterated words whose meaning is expanded and finally an abstract of sorts where the verbs alone are singled out for consideration. Although the Greek prepositions convey a wide range of subtle nuances, the verbs more precisely represent the action of *polupragmon*, of busy-bodyness. Putting the Sirach text in this way is to avoid making the process too cumbersome:

Text with transliterated Greek words

Blessed (makarios) **is the man who meditates** (teleutao: to complete, finish, fulfill) **on** (en) **wisdom and who reasons** (dialegomai with or en & sunesis) **intelligently. He who reflects in his mind** (dianoemai: to intend, suppose, with kardia or heart) **on her ways will also ponder** (noeo: to think, suppose, be thoughtful) **her secrets** (apokruphos: from apokrupto, to hide from, with en). **Pursue** (exerchomai) **wisdom like a hunter** (ichneutes: a tracker), **and lie in wait** (enedreuo: to be caught in an ambush) **on her paths** (enodos: literally, in way). **He who peers through** (parakupto: to stoop sideways) **her windows** (thuris: from thura or double or folding doors) **will also listen** (akroamai: to hearken) **at** (epi) **her doors; he who encamps** (kataluo: to put down, dissolve, lodge) **near** (suneggus) **her house will also fasten** (pegnumi: to make fast, solid) **his tent peg to her walls. He will pitch** (istemi) **his tent** (kata) **her and will lodge** (kataluo) **in an excellent lodging place** (kataluma, with en); **he will place his children under her shelter** (skepe: covering) **and will camp under** (aulizomai: to lie in the courtyard, with hupo) **her boughs; he will be sheltered** (skepao, with hupo) **by her from the heat, and will dwell in the midst of** (kataluo) **her glory** (doxa).

Text with an expansion of the transliterated Greek words

-**Blessed**: *makarios*. The same word used in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” etc. The equivalent Hebrew word *‘ashry* begins the Psalter: “Blessed is man who walks in the law of the Lord” and is essential for setting the tone for all the psalms *‘Ashry* may be associated with two other words in vs. 1, “the man” (*ha’ysh*)

and “which” (*’asher*). It derives from the Hebrew verbal root *’ashar* whose fundamental meaning is straightness and relates to the direction-towards-which as the way the psalmist defines blessedness. Note that the relative pronoun *’asher* (which) comes from this root, signifying a transitional state; it is associated with “man,” *’ysh*. Thus blessedness may be posited as an integral component of our human constitution. In light of these observations, being *’ashry* implies being in a state of transition, of moving forward, of not standing still. Such blessedness is like that relative pronoun, *’asher*, signifying continuous alteration.

-is the man who meditates on wisdom: *teleutao*. This verb means to complete, finish, fulfill and is used with respect to wisdom (*sophia*) which implies knowledge by acquaintance, shrewdness and can be applied to knowing a craft. Thus *sophia* has a hands-on quality about it as opposed to being an ethereal entity. The preposition *en* (in) is used for “on”...i.e., “meditates in wisdom” or being fulfilled (*telos*: adjective which translates often as perfect) within it as a living presence.

-and who reasons intelligently: *dialegomai*. This verb means to hold conversation with, to discuss or argue. The preposition *dia* (through) is prefixed to it indicating a thorough examination of the subject matter at hand. As with wisdom, we have the preposition *en* or “in” with respect to *sunesis*, “in intelligence.” The noun translates as “a being with” or “coming together.” It is composed of the preposition *sun* (with) and the verb to be.

-He who reflects in his mind: *dianoemai*. It means to intend, suppose, with the preposition *dia* (through) prefaced to it as with *dialegomai* above (“reasons”). From the verb *noeo* (to perceive by the eyes, observe) derives *noos*, the faculty of perception which also implies one’s mind and heart. This broader meaning makes sense with the place-where this reflecting occurs, “in his mind” or *kardia* which fundamentally means heart). The object of *dia-noeo* within the heart is **her ways** (*hodos*) or paths of wisdom, *sophia*.

-will also ponder: *noeo*. Here the verb lacks the prefix *dia*...i.e., no “through” is associated with it. The object of this perceiving-through is **her secrets**, *apokruphos*, which is derived from *apokrupto*, to hide from. Joined with it is the preposition *en* (in) or full presence within these secrets. The English adverb “also” (*kai* or and) acts as a connective joining *noeo* with *dianoemai*...i.e., two forms of the same verbal root.

-Pursue: *exerchomai*. This is the common verb “to go out” with *ex* (out) prefixed to the verb. **Wisdom** or *sophia* is the object of this going out followed by the preposition *opiso* (after).

-wisdom like a hunter: *ichnueos*. The “going out” just noted is to be done in the manner of someone who tracks game, *ichnueo* being the verbal root. Both an aggressiveness and cunning is involved in such hunting or better, more like a scout who watches for footprints, etc., to reach his quarry.

-and lie in wait: *enedreuo*. Not only is stealth implied but its opposite, being caught in an ambush. Such expectation has a specific location, **on her** (wisdom’s) **paths** (*eisodos*). This noun consists of the root *hodos* (way, path) with the preposition *eis* (into) prefixed to it. That is to say, not only is this ambush laid but laid “into” the very paths on which wisdom is expected to tread. The noun is plural signifying many roads, so laying in wait necessitates doing it for an indefinite number of such pathways.

-He who peers through: *parakupto*. Instead of laying in wait on a road to ensnare *sophia*, the image shifts to her being at home. The verb at hand means not just to stoop but to do so sideways which makes this gesture awkward to perform. It suggests a kind of peeping without the person or object (*sophia*) being aware of the fact. The preposition *para* (besides) is prefaced to the verb *kupto*, to bend forward, to stoop down. It enhances the action, intimating that wisdom’s windows are low or close to the ground, almost belonging to a basement apartment. Not only that, they are built at an angle which requires looking within indirectly.

-her windows: *thuris*. This noun is the diminutive of *thura* and can apply to a double or folding doors).

Usually such doors open outwards from the inside and can belong to a porch. Also *thuris* can translate as a court. In the case at hand, wisdom has a number of them through which we are bidden to *parakupto*.

-will also listen: *akroamai*. The verb means to hearken or pay close attention. While the faculty of sight applies to wisdom’s windows, that of hearing pertains to wisdom or more precisely, **at her doors**. The noun here is *thuromata* or a room with doors to it. All the while wisdom is at home within, most likely where she spends most of her time. The preposition for “at” is *epi*, more accurately, “upon.” It serves to intensify the person who is listening. As for the more precise object of such listening (as well as peering-through), nothing specific is mentioned. It is for the person doing this to find it out. For now, task at hand is to follow the instructions given in Sirach.

-he who encamps: *kataluo*, which means to unloosen, dissolve, lodge. Now we move to what the person outside wisdom’s does, for the remaining images apply to being outdoors while wisdom continues to remain within her home. The verbal root is *luo* (to loosen) with the preposition *kata* (according to) is prefixed to it.

Encamping by this house means that one is serious about being close to wisdom...being “according to it”...not simply peering through her windows and listening in.

-**near** (*suneggus*) **her house** (*oikos*). The adverb can also apply to a person of similar rank, that one being so close to wisdom’s dwelling might become like her. *Oikos* is the common word for “house.”

-**will also fasten his tent peg to her walls**. The verb is *pegnumi*, to make fast, solid related to “tent peg” or *passalos*. It can also mean a peg on which to hang clothes. Instead of fastening such pegs into the ground, here they are dug into the walls of wisdom’s house. That means the pegs aren’t attached to the ground but to the house in which she dwells. With this in mind, the image is a kind of lean-to as opposed to the commonly perceived tent.

-**He will pitch his tent near her**. The common verb *istemi* means to stand, establish. It suggests making this tent permanent, as permanent as wisdom’s *oikos*. The preposition “near” or *kata* (according to as noted above with regard to *kataluo* (to encamp) means that this tent will be in accord with the establishment of the *oikos*.

-**and will lodge**: *kataluo*. The same verb is used above as in “he who encamps.” There it was with respect to wisdom’s house but here it refers to being situated **in an excellent lodging place**. The noun is *kataluma* or an inn. It is derived from the verb *kataluo*. Perhaps the vague sense of dissolving proper to the verb implies that this place is temporary or until the person gets inside wisdom’s *oikos*. The adjective “excellent” is *agathos* or more precisely, “(lodging place) of goods.”

-**he will place his children under her shelter**. The common verb *tithemi* is used. The person described as attentive to wisdom does not wish her benefits for himself alone but for his children or for later generations which is a means of handing on his name. *Skepe* means “shelter” or a covering which intimates protection. Note that the children are placed under the shelter of wisdom, not the tent pitched against her house.

-**and will camp under**: *aulizomai*. The verb means to lie in the courtyard as opposed to either outside the house’s bound or within it. This encamping appears to be a bit distant from wisdom’s *oikos*; it is under **her boughs** or *klados* which means a young shoot, usually from an olive tree. In other words, the boughs seem to extend away from the house proper. Olive oil symbolizes richness, and the prospect of encamping under such branches is symbolic of partaking of wisdom who remains within her house.

-**he will be sheltered**: *skepao*. This is the verbal root for *skepe* or “shelter” noted above. Here reference is made to the person so encamped compared with his children remaining under the *skepe* of wisdom. Being outside the house means exposure to weather, especially the hot sun. Note that the boughs do not provide this shelter, beneficial as they are; it comes **by her from the heat** or from wisdom herself.

-**and will dwell in the midst of her glory**: *kataluo*. These words complete the Sirach excerpt. The verb is used above as to encamp and lodge as well as being the root for lodging place. Because of the association of *kataluo* with something that is dissolved, it is applicable to the images of this paragraph as being outside the house of wisdom trying to get in. Nothing is said about entry, but the person so encamped is in the midst of (*en*, in) the glory (*doxa*) of wisdom. This is not unlike Israel encamped at the base of Mount Sinai where God revealed himself to Moses. The hope is that those at the mountain’s base will be able to ascent.

In addition to the important role of prepositions, another way to sum up the Sirach paragraph is to abstract the verbs from it: meditate (*teleutao*), reason (*dialegomai*), reflect (*dianoemai*), ponder (*noeo*), pursue (*exerchomai*), lie in wait (*enedreuo*), peer through (*parakupto*), listen (*akroamai*), encamp (*kataluo*), fasten (*pegnumi*), pitch tent (*istemi*), lodge (*kataluo*), place children, camp (*aulizomai*), will be sheltered (*skepao*: *skepe* or shelter re. “place children”), dwell (*kataluo*). This list shows the dynamic nature of “being *polupragmon*” with respect to wisdom, the incredibly varied ways the mind is invited to exercise itself instead of being pre-occupied with the spew emanating from thoughts and mental images.

Throughout the breakdown of Sirach 14.20-7 close attention is paid to Greek prepositions, for all have as their object the pursuit...the busy-bodyness or *polupragmon*...with respect to wisdom, *sophia*. Never does she vacate her house nor reveals herself, making the passage all the more intriguing. In addition to standing alone, many prepositions are prefixed to nouns and verbs. This lends a subtleness close to impossible to communicate in translation. While being attentive to the prepositions in all their various implications, keep in mind they are good indicators of how infinitely varied can be the operation of *polupragmon*. That is to say, busy-bodyness is a continuous loop of thinking in, from, outside, above, beside, according and so forth. As we know from experience, these prepositions are applicable to the multitude of our thoughts and images: only here with respect to Sirach are they transformed. The same can apply to Scripture as a whole.

In this essay I attempted to describe the Bottom Line or two aspects pertinent to spiritual growth under a single heading, namely, the Greek term *polupragmon*. First we saw how an especially embarrassing memory can be transformed into a treasured ally and second, considered a passage from the Book of Sirach which serves as an antidote to the constant spew of thoughts and images. Perhaps the matter could have been set forth more clearly. Be that as it may, hammering out these ideas was both a challenge and joy, and in the near future I will flesh them out better. Indeed this subject matter is fascinating because it lies within our power to direct toward a favorable end that which formerly had irked us literally to no end. No question that effort is required. However, as one moves along, quickly he or she will discover that assistance is necessary from without: in other words, divine grace. A lot of conditioning affects everyone who undertakes the path of self-discovery, so considerable time is required to rectify what we find within ourselves. In addition, there lies beneath the surface of our efforts a host of complicated historical influences. They can be traced in part to an unfortunate gap...rather, a chasm...between theology and its application or spirituality. It was not so at the beginning of Christianity but had widened over the centuries, a snowball effect which touches each one of us. We can't undo these effects though we can have reference to an earlier time when the two worked hand-in-hand as during the first several centuries of the Church's existence. Nowadays people tend to identify spirituality with devotion which unfortunately became at odds with a spirit of inquiry represented by philosophy. In other words, we've ended up with a split between heart and mind. To a certain extent the incessant flow of thoughts and images is exacerbated by this artificial division, yet it doesn't have to be so.

To conclude, spirituality is bound up with the notion of transcendence which signifies that which lies completely beyond perception and can never be brought within the realm of human experience. The unrelenting stream of thoughts and images the mind produces is impervious to any suggestive of an alternative. One seventeenth author put it well and simply: to adore God in truth is to admit that our nature is just the opposite of his. While we may acknowledge the difference in natures (an awareness that becomes much more profound as time goes on), it looms even larger by reason of the society in which we live. At the same time we have an inbuilt desire for something beyond ourselves that persists in light of stiff resistance. Thus it's a question of sounding out this inner resource without manipulating it.

Several references to *polupragmon* from the Dialogues of Plato

(The source of these citations is Plato: Complete Works, edited by John M Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997))

Theaetetus

But perhaps it would be better if you stated the answers yourself rather than that I should *busy* myself on your behalf. 184.e4

Rival Lovers

But no, my friend, philosophers are not like that, and philosophy does not consist in stooping to a concern with skills nor in *learning many things*, but in something quite different. 137.b3

Gorgias

Once in a while he (Rhadamanthus, a judge in the underworld) he inspects another soul, one who has lived a pious life, one devoted to truth, the should of a private citizen or someone else, especially...that of a philosopher has minded his own affairs and *hasn't been meddling* in the course of his life. He admires the man and sends him off to the Isles of the Blessed. 526.c4

Republic

Moreover, we've heard many people say and have often said ourselves that justice is doing one's work and not *meddling* with what isn't one's own. 433.a8

But I suppose that when someone (referring to a craftsman, money-maker, soldier) tries to enter that (class) of the judges and guardians, and these exchange their tools and honors, or when the same person tries to do all these things at once, then I think you'll agree that these exchanges and this sort of *meddling* bring the city to ruin. 434.b9

Justice isn't concerned with someone's doing his own externally, but with what is inside him, with what is truly himself and his own. One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allows the various classes within him *to meddle with* each other. He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. 443.d2

Surely injustice must be a kind of civil war between the three parts (rational, appetitive and spirited), a meddling and doing of another's work, a rebellion by some part against the whole soul in order to rule in inappropriately. 444.b2

Laws

We generally say that so far as the supreme deity and the universe are concerned, we ought not to *bother our heads* hunting up explanations, because that is an act of impiety. In fact, precisely the opposite seems to be true. 821.a3

Several references to *anamnesis* from the Dialogues of Plato

Theaetetus

-We may look upon it (a block of wax in our souls), then, as a gift of Memory, the mother of the Muses. We make impressions upon this of everything, we wish to remember among the things we have seen or heard or thought of ourselves; we hold the wax under our perceptions and thoughts and take a stamp from them, in the way in which we take the imprints of signet rings. Whatever is impressed upon the wax we remember and know as long as the image remains in the wax; whatever is obliterated or cannot be impressed we forget and do not know. 191d

-In some men the wax in the soul is deep and abundant, smooth and worked to the proper consistency; and when the things that come through the senses are imprinted upon this "heart" of the soul—as Homer calls it, hinting at the likeness to the wax—the signs that are made in it are lasting, because they are clear and have sufficient depth. Men with such souls learn easily and remember what they learn; they do not get the signs out of line with the perceptions, but judge truly. 194c-d

Phaedo

-Such also is the case if that theory is true that you are accustomed to mention frequently, that for us learning is no other than recollection. According to this, we must at some previous time have learned what we now recollect. This is possible only if our soul existed somewhere before it took on this human shape. So according to this theory too, the soul is likely to be something immortal. 72.e

-Do we also agree that when knowledge comes to mind in this way, it is recollection? What way do I mean? Like this: when a man sees or hears or in some other way perceives one thing and not only knows that thing but also thinks of another thing of which the knowledge is not the same but different, are we not right to say that he recollects the second thing that comes into his mind? 73.c

-In all these cases the recollection can be occasioned by things that are similar, but it can also be occasioned by things that are dissimilar? It can. When the recollection is caused by similar things, must one not of necessity also experience this: to consider whether the similarity to that which one recollects is deficient in any respect or complete? One must. 74a

-It was seen to be possible for someone to see or hear or other wise perceive something, and by this to be put in mind of something else which he had forgotten and which is related to it by similarity or difference. One of two things follows as I say: either we were born with the knowledge of it, and all of us know it throughout life, or those who later, we say, are learning, are only recollecting, and learning would be recollection. 76a

-The theory of recollection and learning, however, was based on an assumption worthy of acceptance, for our soul was said to exist also before it came into the body, just as the reality does that is of the kind that we qualify by the words "which truly is," and I convinced myself that I was quite correct to accept it. 92d

Philebus

-S: And do we not hold that recollection differs from memory?

P: Perhaps.

S: Does not their difference lie in this?

P: In what?

S: Do we not call it "recollection" when the soul recalls as much as possible by itself, without the aid of the body, what she had once experienced together with the body? Or how would you put it?

P: I quite agree.

S: But on the other hand, when, after the loss of memory of either a perception or again a piece of knowledge, the soul calls up this memory for itself, we also call all these events recollection. 34b

-If memory and perceptions concur with other impressions at a particular occasion, then they seem to me to inscribe words in our soul, as it were. And if what is written is true, then we form a true judgment and a true

account of the matter. But if what our scribe writes is false, then the result will be the opposite of truth. 39a

Phaedrus

-But not every soul is easily reminded of the reality there by what it finds here—not souls that got only a brief glance at the reality there, not souls who had such bad luck when they fell down here that they were twisted by bad company into lives of injustice so that they forgot the sacred objects they had seen before. Only a few remain whose memory is good enough; and they are startled when they see an image of what they saw up there. Then they are beside themselves, and their experience is beyond their comprehension because they cannot fully grasp what it is that they are seeing. 250a-b

-It (writing) will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. 275a

Meno

-As the soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things. As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection. 81c

-So let us speak about virtue also, since we do not know either what it is or what qualities it possesses, and let us investigate whether it is teachable or not by means of a hypothesis, and say this: Among the things existing in the soul, of what sort is virtue, that it should be teachable or not? First, if it is another sort than knowledge, is it teachable or not, or, as we were just saying, recollectable? 87b

-For true opinions, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why. And that, Meno, my friend, is recollection, as we previously agreed. After they are tied down, in the first place they become knowledge, and then they remain in place. That is why knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from correct opinion in being tied down. 98a