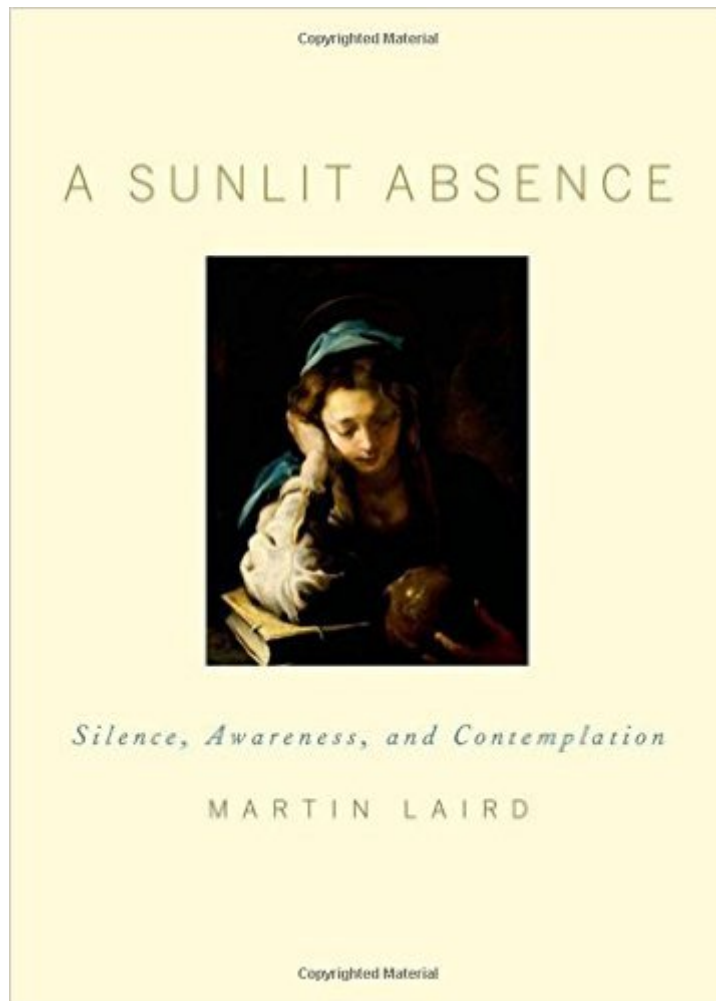


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# A Sunlit Absence: Silence, Awareness, And Contemplation



## Synopsis

"The practice of contemplation is one of the great spiritual arts," writes Martin Laird in *A Sunlit Absence*. "Not a technique but a skill, it harnesses the winds of grace that lead us out into the liberating sea of silence." In this companion volume to his bestselling *Into the Silent Land*, Laird focuses on a quality often overlooked by books on Christian meditation: a vast and flowing spaciousness that embraces both silence and sound, and transcends all subject/object dualisms. Drawing on the wisdom of great contemplatives from St. Augustine and St. Teresa of Avila to St. Hesychios, Simone Weil, and many others, Laird shows how we can uncover the deeper levels of awareness that rest within us like buried treasure waiting to be found. The key insight of the book is that as our practice matures, so will our experience of life's ordeals, sorrows, and joys expand into generous, receptive maturity. We learn to see whatever difficulties we experience in meditation--boredom, lethargy, arrogance, depression, grief, anxiety--not as obstacles to be overcome but as opportunities to practice surrender to what is. With clarity and grace Laird shows how we can move away from identifying with our turbulent, ever-changing thoughts and emotions to the cultivation of a "sunlit absence"--the luminous awareness in which God's presence can most profoundly be felt. Addressed to both beginners and intermediates on the pathless path of still prayer, *A Sunlit Absence* offers wise guidance on the specifics of contemplative practice as well as an inspiring vision of the purpose of such practice and the central role it can play in our spiritual lives.

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## Customer Reviews

I found this book to be an excellent follow-up to his first book on the subject of contemplation. Even though I lived as a cloistered contemplative monk for many years & have read a great deal on this topic & have given many contemplative retreats, I still found this book to be very insightful, with many quotes from teachers in this tradition as well as a very unique & beautiful way of presenting. A very clear, concise & poetic presentation. I highly recommend this book along with its companion book. Rev. Robert J. Powell

Readers of Laird's *Into the Silent Land* will be eager to get their hands on this companion volume. This book, like Laird's previous one, is destined to become a classic text. He skillfully weaves together contemporary psychological savvy with patristic and desert sources on the prayer of the heart. A true gem written by the contemplative's contemplative.

Another gem by Martin Laird, *"A Sunlit Absence"* presents further encouragement in the practice of contemplation, "one of the great spiritual arts." Many sources all the way from John of the Cross to Mark Twain to Holy Scripture enrich the reader's experience. Laird gives specific ways to quiet constant mind-tripping and the videos that run on and on. Describing how we are held prisoner to inner chatter, he quotes St. Hesychios. "A donkey going round and round in a mill cannot step out of the circle." Through physical silence in prayer, as our awareness is deepened, compassion for others grows. One meets noise with stillness. Again Laird quotes St. Hesychios, "Awareness is a spiritual method which, sedulously practiced over a long period, completely frees us with God's help from compulsive thoughts." After long practice and many failures, silent prayer allows us to receive "with awareness all that is, just as it is, as a large screened-in porch receives whatever breeze that blows." Finally "We learn to see whatever difficulties we experience in meditation - boredom, lethargy, arrogance, depression, grief, anxiety - not as obstacles to be overcome but as opportunities to practice surrender." If you practice Contemplative Prayer, *"A Sunlit Absence"* will be a welcome addition to your library.

So great to have more from Martin Laird to encourage the practice of contemplation. I find it helpful to have on hand and read a little for inspiration before beginning my practice of silent meditation. Having been really helped over anxiety by his first book *Into the Silent Land* I was keen to have more to encourage me to keep at it. This book is just as wonderful as the first one.

Gently insightful, quiet in tone, thoroughly researched, this book takes readers still further into

silence, awareness and contemplation than the preceding book, "Into the Silent Land". Anecdotes from modern day experience, the wisdom of desert and church fathers, saints, poetry, art and novels are all gathered in support and illustration of the book's themes. They are used in such a way that the reader wants to go back to the original texts, so I refreshed myself with Seamus Heaney's poetry, picked up the writings of Evagrius for the first time and resolved to return to St. Teresa of Avila. Contemplation informs every part of life, so it is fitting that every part of life should meet with contemplation in this book. I was grateful that the difficulties of contemplation were investigated at some depth. Some points of practice about which I was unsure after reading "Into the Silent Land" became much clearer for me, producing shifts and growth that were palpable in my own life. "A Sunlit Absence" is best read after "Into the Silent Land" because there is a clear development and deepening from one text to the next. I shall read this book much more than once.

This is a wonderful book if you are going to take the work of contemplative prayer seriously. If you are familiar with the work of Keating and Pennington, then this book is an excellent follow-on. It is well written, and goes into the nitty-gritty of contemplation and emphasises the difficulties and joys one experiences in this type of prayer. It was hard work at one level. It was easy to read, and the author is a kindly man, but there was nowhere to hide. He managed to get into the corners of one's experience, and expose all one's human weakness. I used it as my Lent study, and it was ideal for that.

This is a good companion to Martin Laird's other work, "Into the Silent Land" which focus more on the basics of how to enter into contemplative prayer. "A Sunlit Absence" looks at various aspects of the practice, especially with an eye to seeing where problems and barriers develop and how to overcome them. His examples from teaching contemplation to college students of various levels of faith development was both interesting and enlightening. A good book to take along with you for a retreat and read a chapter at a time over a couple days.

Martin Laird discusses the finer points of contemplation using many examples drawn from educating students and directing silent retreats. With the resurgence and increase interest in contemplative practice from the Christian viewpoints many of his terms are modern and richer such as collection of videos which run in the head. Laird draws from poets, past contemplatives, and psychology. He gives examples of some of the difficulties encountered in this practice, boredom, depression, which will lead to the self surrender and maturity. This book and 'Into the Silent Land' are worth the price

of admission.

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