Suggestions from Westminster College, Cambridge

How to enjoy art for a Retreat or Quiet Day

First Suggestion: looking at pictures in different ways

Here are some ideas for you to explore and enjoy...

1. There are many different ways of using images like these postcards as starting points for meditation and prayer. Many will enable you to dwell upon an image without necessarily needing to do anything more. Others may open up all sorts of lines for further exploration.

2. One very immediate way is to pick a handful of postcards, or let them jump out at you. Lay them all out in front of you. Pause in prayerfulness and invite God to open up to you whatever God wills for you. There’s no right way to do this, no right answer, no pressure to deliver or discover anything. Just be with God and these pictures. Take time. Don’t rush. Does an image spark some sort of response in you? Why has a particular images, or a part of an image, attracted you? Part of what you may want to do is to imagine what the artist or photographer was trying to capture. But more importantly looking at a picture is about allowing ourselves to respond to it; the artist has offered the image and can’t now control what you see or find within it. Art works through alluding to things, offering hints, touching chords in us, stirring memories, evoking feelings.

3. You might want simply to spend time looking at all your images and then allowing one to choose you. One may simply stand out today. You may find it helpful to dwell upon a key word to prompt your choosing of an image. Examples could be: water; life; desert; God; Jesus; Spirit; ministry; Church; Communion; community; joy; pain; sacred space; love; silence; prayer; care; loss; hospitality; friendship; discovery; Bible; etc.

4. Having chosen/been chosen by an image sit in stillness with it for some time, allowing yourself to enjoy it and notice as much as you can about it. Get a pen and paper. For 5 minutes pour out your responses to your image. Don’t worry about neat sentences; just let words and phrases come as you respond to such things as: colour; shapes; lines; marks; patterns; tones (light to dark); mood; feeling; subject; content. Stop writing and spend 5 minutes thinking about how you respond to this image: how do you feel about it; what thoughts does it bring to your mind; what associations does the picture have; what is God saying to you right now? For a final 5 minutes write down a sentence that sums up what you have done and discovered with this image.

5. Another way in is to think of a process of being with an image that involves 4 stages: contemplation; perception; interpretation; response...
Contemplation involves simply being still, breathing slowly and regularly and relaxing so that we can be fully present with the piece of art and with God.

Perception is our active attending to the artwork. Useful questions to ask may be: what do you see; what is the work about; what is the subject matter (if any); what are ten things you see here? And we can move on to ask: does this work touch me; how does it make me feel; am I anywhere in this work?

Interpretation takes us into meanings. We can ask what we think the artist meant in creating this, but also need to ask what we think the meanings might be.

Response involves thinking about what the art might want from us. Has the art moved us to deeper prayer? Has it provoked anger and, if so, why? Has it delighted us or bemused us? Has the art shown us something new about ourselves and our pilgrimage and praying?

6. A further way of looking at pictures is a bit more like a visual version of *lectio divina*. You will probably need to allow yourself about 15-20 minutes to do this. Having chosen a picture position it so that you can sit comfortably and look at it at eye level in a well lit and peaceful space. Pray as you settle yourself to spend time dwelling upon the image and inviting God to be with you and touch your looking. Satisfy yourself if you need to know the title, artist, dates, etc. If you can’t know accept the fact and let it go. Begin to consciously focus upon the picture as a whole. What speaks to you? How does it make you feel? Is it the whole that you want to dwell upon or only a part? Gradually allow a single aspect of the picture to become the focus of your attention and dwell upon it. If you need something to guide you try this...

- Focus upon colour – are there many different ones or just a few; do they jar or are they soothing; are the colours warm (yellows, oranges, reds); are they cool (blues, purples); are large areas dominated by just a few colours?
- Focus upon shapes and lines – what are the relationships between horizontals and verticals; does the picture flow upwards or downwards; how is the artist leading your eye; is it very angular or are there many curves; is the focus sharp with hard outlines or soft with fuzzy images?
- Focus upon tones – does light predominate; does dark predominate; where are there contrasts between light and dark and how do they work?
- Focus upon pattern and texture – is the picture busy with lots going on or simple and still; are there lots of brush marks or none; where is there space for your eye to rest?
- Then ask yourself what aspect of this picture you find most compelling. Dwell upon that. Ask yourself what God might be saying here, or what your response to the art might be saying about you.
- Allow yourself to turn this looking into prayerfulness. Offer to God what has emerged.

To read more about these possibilities:

- Janet Hodgson, 2006, *The Faith We See: Working with Images of Christ*, Peterborough: Inspire, throughout this book there are exercises using images to prompt theological reflection and meditation for individuals and groups
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Second Suggestion: playing with painting

Some people love paint and paper. Others may find the very word “painting” evokes memories of trampled aspirations in long-gone school art classes. Some may dread the very idea and know for sure that they simply cannot paint. But hold on. What if the object here is less about trying to create yet another Mona Lisa (isn’t one enough?) and more about finding a way into silence and prayerfulness simply by playing with colour, texture and form? Painting offers a way in and may well be worth experimenting with simply because the results are unpredictable. By trying a different medium you may find ways of expressing and dwelling upon aspects of your time with God that words alone cannot express or contain. You may simply have fun.

What to do:

1. Find a good place to work. Bear in mind that things may get messy!
2. Pray as you begin. You may want simply to paint and pray and enjoy the stillness of it all. You might take a verse or passage from the Bible and let that be the starting point.
3. When you begin to paint you may feel comfortable simply doing your own thing. If so, go for it!
4. But you may be wondering how to begin, or you might feel you want to avoid controlling too early on what it is you are creating. What follows is a way of using painting that may be helpful...
5. Use a sponge and wet your paper all over on both sides (otherwise it will curl as it dries).
6. Close your eyes for 2 minutes. Dwell upon whatever it is that comes to mind or that you have chosen as the starting point for reflection.
7. Opening your eyes, choose two different colours and load two brushes, one with each colour. Take a brush in each hand.
8. Close your eyes again for 2 minutes and, without looking, paint with both hands simultaneously. You may be working entirely at random, or you might find yourself painting a mental image of something. The way you make contact with the paper may express something significant about how you feel.

9. Open your eyes and see what you’ve got.

10. It may be you have finished your painting and can move into prayer as you contemplate it.

11. But it may be you now want to add more to your work. You might choose extra colours and work over the top of what is already there, or fill in spaces. You might turn the paper around to see it from various angles. You could tilt it to let colours run and merge. You might print into it by pressing paper or objects or your hands into the wet paint. You might lift out colour by using bunched up kitchen towel. You could flick colour at the paper from a brush or scrape into it using the tip of the brush. You might want to collage other things on top of the paint.

12. When you’ve finished painting it may be that the act of creating it is in itself your praying.

13. But you may want to consider some of what has emerged in more detail. You could try writing a spontaneous stream of words that capture your reactions to your work and the issues surrounding it (focus upon your responses to colour, lines, patterns, mood, etc.). Do you see any discernable images and, if so, what are they and why do you see them? How does your work make you feel (energised, depressed, elated, careful, uncertain, blessed, isolated, etc.)? Does your art have a mood (warm, cool, chaotic, placid, etc.)? Is your painting primarily an outpouring of positive or negative emotion, or a mix? If you imagine your painting is a place: what season of the year are you looking at; what time of day; where would you like to be in it and why; what does it evoke in you?

To read more about these possibilities:

Westminster College Quiet Day  

Art in the Stillness

Third Gift

creating collage

This is another very physical way of allowing words, ideas and images to bump into each other and spark in your imagination and soul. It allows you space to play and discover in conversation with the Holy Spirit.

What to do:

1. To start with, gather a big sheet of strong paper to create your collage on and lots of other bits and pieces to stick on to it. You might want bits of text, magazine pages, coloured paper, feathers, shapes, etc. Why not go outside and collect a range of leaves and other textures? You’ll also need some glue and/or tape to stick it all together. You might want some pens and pencils to write or draw into your collage.

2. This activity is one you can begin from various directions. You might begin with a biblical passage that has become important. You might begin with an article from a magazine or paper or journal that speaks about a key issue for you. You might begin with a significant poem, hymn or other piece of writing. You might begin with a photo that has captured something important for you. The key is to connect to something that, somehow, has touched you.

3. Find a good place in which to work. Offer the exercise to God. Cut out whatever it is that you are starting with. Place it somewhere on your board but don’t glue it down yet.

4. Now begin to work through your other assembled resources. Without too much conscious reflection simply cut or tear out words, sentences, headlines, phrases, images, etc. that feel relevant and important. Work as quickly as you can so that you aren’t trying too hard to plot a way through the mass of material you are using. Build up a pile of cut and torn elements beside your board.

5. Now begin to put your cuttings onto your board. Try not to judge yourself as you do this.
Simply place pieces and let them go wherever seems best. Let things emerge without forcing them to.

6. You may want to start gluing as you go. Or you may prefer to arrange everything before you glue anything. But in the end glue your cuttings to the board.

7. Now add colours as feels appropriate; in spaces and/or over your cuttings.

8. When you’ve done all of this stop and take a break. Go for a walk. Have a drink. Let yourself relax.

9. Only when you return should you begin to look at depth at what you’ve created. What emerges as you look? How do you encounter God here?

10. Let this looking flow into praying and resting in God’s presence.

To read more about these possibilities:


Westminster College Quiet Day  

**Art in the Stillness**

**Fourth Gift**  
sculpting

This is a very physical way into prayer and stillness. You may well find yourself producing something exquisite that you will keep as a permanent reminder of this moment. You may find that the act of creating is itself the main thing you wish to dwell upon and that you will not end up keeping your creation. This activity, whilst seemingly quite light and fun, can actually take you to some very deep places. So go gently with yourself and give yourself time to do this (a couple of hours is not unreasonable).

**What to do:**

1. Take time to pray and open yourself to the activity of the Spirit in this time.
2. Play with your materials if you aren’t used to them. Get a feel for how they can be used. Discover how thin you can make them, or if they can hold a curve. Find out if they can be joined together by pressing them or if they need something to hold them together. Enjoy their touch and smell as you use them.
3. You can begin to sculpt by simply letting yourself play with the material and see what begins to emerge. You can discover if you are shaping something abstract or creating an impression of something like a figure or a pot. Only after you have completed your creativity might you stop to enjoy or contemplate your finished piece and begin to reflect upon what it (and the act of creating it) might say about this time with God. Or you might find your piece leading you into thinking about a passage of scripture or a hymn.
4. Another way in is to begin by reflecting upon something that has stuck with you in this moment. It might be something you’ve just seen or heard. It might be an encounter or recent conversation. It might be something positive or negative. It might be a smell or something else that has played in your senses. It might just be a word or piece of music floating in your imagination right now.
5. A third way in is beginning with a passage from the Bible that you read and wish to medi-
state upon. Let the sculpture be a way of allowing the text to roll around you so that you might discover more of what God might be saying to you in this moment.

6. As this time of creating draws to a close decide what you want to do with your sculpture. Do you want to keep it, paint it, destroy it, share it?

7. What has emerged for you in this time of praying and being with God?

To read more about these possibilities:

Westminster College Quiet Day  

Art in the Stillness

Fifth Gift  

letting words play

We use lots of words. Often we use them with great care. This is an invitation to let them tumble out to see where they might take you in prayer.

What to do:

1. Settle yourself with as big a sheet of paper as you feel comfortable with. You’ll also need pens and pencils of different colours.
2. Allow yourself to be still. Offer this time to God in prayer.
3. Start to think about a simple phrase, which might well be a theme for the day such as: water in the desert; hope amidst chaos; love and silence; walking with Jesus; pilgrim and companion; glimpses of glory; abiding in trust; etc. Write the phrase somewhere on your blank paper.
4. Meditate upon your phrase. Dwell upon it without trying to force anything to happen.
5. Then, gently, as thoughts come to mind take your different pens and pencils and write down words and phrases all over your blank sheet. Ensure you keep one pen with a distinctive colour for later in the process.
6. Keep writing and filling the sheet with words. Let them flow into and around each other. Some might be vertical or written across others. Imagine you are collaging with words as if they were on transparent sheets of paper. Write in spirals and crosses.
7. Try not to pause to analyse or reject words. This is for your eyes only so don’t be afraid to use strong language if that is how you feel.
8. When you feel you’ve done enough put down the pens and look over what you’ve created. See if any themes emerge. See if you now want to add anything further. If so, add more
words.


10. Now take the pen you put to one side at the beginning. Think about how God responds to all the words you’ve set down and the thoughts and feelings behind them. Begin to add words and phrases, passages of scripture, words from hymns or prayers. Add them into and around your original words.

11. When it feels right stop and take in what you’ve created.

12. How does it make you feel?

13. What does it reveal?

14. What has it suggested to you about God and God’s presence here?

15. Let your time flow on into prayer as you share a conversation with God about what is emerging from these words. You might want to walk away from them and then return later, to meditate upon them after a bit of space. You might want to turn to a biblical passage with your words to one side to allow scripture and your words to resonate together.

16. Think about what you want to do with these words at the end of this time of meditation and stillness. Do you throw them away? Do you keep them?

To read more about these possibilities: