

Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, by Cynthia Bourgeault

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Introduction

Centering Prayer is aimed at healing the violence in ourselves and purifying the unconscious of its hidden and flawed motivation that reduces and can even cancel out the effectiveness of the external works of mercy, justice and peace.

I (Cynthia) can gratefully say that it has changed my life and the way I understand Christianity. I had never had any luck establishing a meditation practice. I hated to admit it, but the process of trying to nail down and tether my mind, to focus it on a mantra – even the Jesus Prayer – brought howls of inner resistance. I had pretty much given up when I encountered Centering Prayer, and through its uniquely forgiving starting point found my way into meditation at last. I know from my own experience that there is something in this prayer that can restore harmony, dignity, and depth to our lived Christian community.

I (Cynthia) had the good fortune of spending my first six school years in a Quaker school, where weekly silent “meeting for worship” was as an invariable part of the rhythm of life as schoolwork or recess. We would be trooped into the cavernous two-story meetinghouse. Occasionally, there would be a scriptural verse or thought offered, but for long stretches there was simply silence. And in that silence, as I gazed up at the sunlight sparkling through those high upper windows, or followed a secret tug drawing me down into my own heart, I began to know a prayer much deeper than “taking to God.” Somewhere in those depths of silence I came upon my first experiences of God as a loving presence that was always near, and prayer as a simple trust in that presence.

What I know now, of course, is that the type of prayer I was being exposed to during those meetings for worship was contemplative prayer. In essence, contemplative prayer is simply a wordless, trusting opening of self to the divine presence. Far from being advanced, it is about the simplest form of prayer there is. Children recognize it instantly – as I did – perhaps because, as the sixteenth-century mystic John of the Cross intimates, “Silence is God’s first language.”

We never made a big deal of it because it was sensed among the Quakers to be so supremely natural, like a baby duck taking to water. As we grow up, of course, our minds grow more complex and more settled in their own orbits. We spend so much of our adult energies thinking, planning, worrying, trying to get ahead or stay afloat, that we lose touch with that natural intimacy with God deep within us. The gift of silence gradually recedes in the face of the demands of daily life, so that when we do re-encounter contemplative prayer as adults, it may seem like a strange and inaccessible inner terrain.

With some effort, we can stop the outer noise. Silent walks in the woods, Lenten and Advent quiet days at the local church, or a retreat at a monastery are wonderful ways of doing just that. But stopping the inner noise is another matter. Even when the outer world has been wrestled into silence, we still go right on talking, worrying, arguing with ourselves, daydreaming, fantasizing. To encounter those deeper reaches of our being, where our own life is constantly flowing out of and back into the divine life, what first seems to be needed is some sort of an interior on/off switch to

tone down the inner talking as well. That's probably the simplest way to picture what Centering Prayer is, and to describe its relationship to contemplative prayer. At root, it is a very simple method for reconnecting us with that natural aptitude for the inner life, that simplicity of our childhood, once our adult minds have become overly complex and busy.

Centering Prayer is a simple way of praying, not by saying words or engendering thoughts, but by simply being in silence and allowing one's heart to open toward that invisible but always present 'Origin of all that exists.' Prayer is listening to God. Not even listening for messages, exactly, but just being there, quietly gathered in God's presence.

In centering prayer, you take a brief vacation from yourself.

Your aim is to be totally available and open to God.

In emptying of yourself, you come closer to being Yourself.

"In the center of one's nothingness one meets the infinitely real." – Thomas Merton

### How

Sit, or lie, and allow your heart to be open toward God.

Whenever a thought comes into your mind, simply let the thought go, and return to that open, silent attending upon the depths, not because thinking is bad, but because it pulls you back to the surface of yourself.

If you need to, use a "sacred word" to remind you to let go of thoughts. A sacred word might be "peace," "abba," or "be still." Find one that is right for you. You only use the sacred word when you "notice" that you are being attracted to a thought. Let your sacred word come to you.

Practice centering prayer for whatever time you have – perhaps 20 minutes or longer. Then simply get up and move on with your life.

What goes on in those silent depths during the time of Centering Prayer is no one's business, not even your own; it is between your innermost being and God; that place where, as St. Augustine once said, "God is closer to your soul than you are yourself."

Ninety percent of the trick in successfully establishing a practice of Centering Prayer lies in wanting to do it in the first place.

If you catch yourself thinking, you simply let the thought go.

Lots of thoughts will try to fill your silence. Expect them. They will play for your attention. Recognize them and let them go without getting entangled in them. The goal in Centering Prayer is not to stop the thoughts, but simply to develop a detached attitude toward them.

"The Four Rs": Resist no thought, retain no thought, react to no thought, return to the sacred word.

The ego abhors a vacuum, and your ego will incessantly try to fill up this vacuum with content. Don't fight the thoughts. Just let them go.

Have an attitude of spiritual non-possessiveness. Our natural inclination is to grab on: to help ourselves and build ourselves up. Rather, practice spiritual poverty. Let God do it.

If we grab hold of no thought, then no thought can grab hold of us.

Your own subjective experience of the prayer may be that nothing happened - except for the more-or-less continuous motion of letting go of thoughts. But in the depths of your being, in fact, plenty has been going on, and things are quietly but firmly being rearranged. That interior rearrangement – or to give it its rightful name, that interior awakening – is the real business of Centering Prayer. When your centering prayer time is over, you simply get up and get on with your day. No need to analyze what happened or talk to anyone. Allow it to be as it is. If you experience many thoughts during the prayer, you can look at this as many opportunities to let go and return to silence. It is not so important to do it right or understand what you are doing. What is most important is to just begin and do it.

Meditation (From Peter Russell's book Waking Up in Time)

A common aim of meditation is to bring mental activity to an end and so reach what could be described as a state of "still mind." A still mind is a mind that is free from fear, free from fantasies, free from ruminations about the past, free from concern about what may or may not be happening to it. It is a mind no longer disturbed by the many thoughts that come from believing that fulfillment lies in what we have or what we do. For once, the ego-mind has fallen silent.

Consciousness itself remains; you are still awake, you are still aware. You, the 'experiencer,' still exist. For a while, you are free from your hopes and fears, your social status, your character and personality, and all the other things that gave you a sense of personal identity. You are free to know the underlying Self.

Such knowing comes not as an idea or an understanding, for that would make the subject of experience an object of experience. Besides, the still mind is a mind that is not moved by ideas or understandings - at least, not as we normally think of them. This knowing comes from a direct acquaintance with the Self. I simply AM. I am not any thing; there is no substance or form to my being. Yet its reality is absolutely clear - and undeniable.

It is this transcendence of the ego and remembering of one's underlying nature that give meditation its value. Here are the identity, peace, and serenity that we have been searching for all along. Here is the fulfillment for which we have been yearning. Then, when we come out of meditation, we return to active life with a taste of this inner truth, feeling a little less attached to the things of the world.

No single moment of transcendence is likely to enlighten us forever. Our conditioning is so deep that it is not long before we one again are caught up in our hopes, fears, worries, and concerns, and once again start looking for external sources of fulfillment. But a little of the taste remains, and our attachment to the world may not be quite as strong as it was before... and perhaps after another taste, a little less strong still. This is why regular meditation practice is usually recommended: a daily dose of remembering of ourselves in our unconditioned state.

"Prayer is not a request for God's favors. True, it has been used to obtain the satisfaction of personal desires. It has even been adopted to reinforce prejudices, justify violence, and create barriers between people and between countries. But genuine prayer is based on recognizing the Origin of all that exists, and opening ourselves to it.... In prayer we acknowledge God as the supreme source from which flows all strength, all goodness, all existence, acknowledging that we have our being, life itself from this supreme Power. One can then communicate with this Source, worship it, and ultimately place one's very center in it." – Piero Ferrucci, *Ineffable Grace* (p. 254)

### Deeper Silence, Deeper Self

Virtually every spiritual tradition that holds a vision of human transformation at its heart also claims that a practice of intentional silence is a non-negotiable. Period. When I talk about “transformation” and “awakening,” incidentally, I should make clear that I am not using New Age terminology. I am speaking of: “You must be born from above.” “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for me will find it.” Among the worldwide religions, Christianity is surely one of those most urgently and irrevocably set upon the total transformation of the human person.

Like most the great spiritual masters of our universe, Jesus taught from the conviction that we human beings are victims of a tragic case of mistaken identity. The person I normally take myself to be – that busy, anxious little “I” so preoccupied with its goals, fears, desires, and issues – is never even remotely the whole of who I am, and to seek the fulfillment of my life at this level means to miss out on the bigger life. This is why, according to his teaching, the one who tries to keep his “life” (i.e., the small one) will lose it, and the one who is willing to lose it will find the real thing. Beneath the surface there is a deeper and vastly more authentic Self, but its presence is usually veiled by the clamor of the smaller “I” with its insatiable needs and demands. This confusion between small self and larger Self (variously known in the traditions as “True Self,” “Essential Self,” or “Real I”) is the core illusion of the human condition, and penetrating this illusion is what awakening is all about.

### Three Levels of Awareness

Father Thomas Keating talks about three levels of awareness. They are...

Ordinary Awareness: This is the mind as it usually thinks, and our sense of self tied to that way of thinking. The subject/object polarity built into the way the mind works sets up the impression of “having” a distinct identity, informed by certain attributes and imbued with certain gifts that need to become fully expressed if my personhood is to be whole. That sets up a good deal of expectation – and also a good deal of anxiety. If one really follows closely what thinking and selfhood feel like at this ordinary level, it is not a pretty picture. Into our head, out of nowhere, pop random thoughts, memories, associations, and sensations. Sometimes they are stimulated by the environment; more often by the environment triggering a memory or triggering a reaction or chain reaction. I had read somewhere that without spiritual training the human mind is unable to concentrate on anything for more than two minutes. The Buddhists call this “monkey mind.” Another name for “ordinary awareness” is “egoic thinking.” Without special training, your sense of the world and your sense of yourself will be formed at this level of awareness.

Spiritual Awareness: It is deeper than ordinary awareness, and it is in every single one of us though unbeknownst to most of us. “Awareness” might be too mental a word to describe it, however; the sensation is much more visceral, more like that tug I experienced as a child in Quaker meeting, drawing me down into my depths. You might picture it as a kind of interior compass whose magnetic north is always fixed on God. The problem is that most of us are not in touch with our spiritual awareness, let alone having any idea of what it’s there for or how to use it. Whereas ordinary awareness perceives through self-reflexive consciousness, which splits the world into subject and object; spiritual awareness perceives through an intuitive grasp of the whole and an innate sense of belonging. And since spiritual awareness is perception based on harmony, the sense of selfhood arising out of it is not plagued by that sense of isolation and anxiety that dominates life at the ordinary level of awareness.

The Divine Indwelling/Divine Awareness: If we have within us a compass pointing to the magnetic north of God, does this mean that God dwells within us, as the center of our being? Cautiously, the answer to this question is “yes.” I say “cautiously” because Christian theology makes very clear that the human being is not God and that the innermost core of our being is not itself divine. And yet theology has always upheld the reality of the “divine indwelling.” As we move toward center, our own being and the divine being become more and more mysteriously interwoven. “There is in the soul a something in which God dwells, and there is in the soul a something in which the soul dwells in God.” – Meister Eckhart. At the center of our being is an innermost point of truth which shares not only the likeness, but perhaps even the substance of God’s own being. Merton makes it clear that access to this center is not at our command; it is entered only through the gateway of our complete poverty and nothingness.

The divine indwelling is the cornerstone of contemplative prayer. Thomas Keating refers to it as “our personal big bang,” for it reveals the Source of our own being – the explosion of divine love into form which first gave rise to our personal life. It also reveals the direction in which our hearts must travel for a constantly renewed intimacy with this Source. As we enter contemplative prayer, we draw near the wellspring from which our being flows.

#### Mary and Martha

A way to picture this teaching on “levels of awareness” is to think of it in terms of the gospel story of Mary and Martha. Martha, whom we’ll say is the embodiment of ordinary awareness, is doing all the things that are characteristic of ordinary awareness. She’s busy, she’s efficient, she’s getting the necessary tasks accomplished. She’s also, you may notice, stressed out, judgmental, self-righteous, and not above manipulation if it suits her needs.

By contrast, we have spiritual awareness as embodied by Mary, who is simply sitting in complete, rapt attunement to the divine, indwelling presence: Jesus. For Mary, preparing dinner is not an issue; she’s already at the banquet table.

It’s not that Martha is “wrong” and Mary is “right.” Both types of awareness are necessary for functioning in this world. But the idea in spiritual transformation is to integrate and reprioritize these levels so that our ordinary awareness is in alignment with and in service to our spiritual awareness (which in turn, as we have seen, is in service to the divine awareness). In that alignment our being flows rightly, from innermost out. When something needs to be done in the outer world, we have sufficient ego strength to do it. But unlike ordinary awareness, which is always doing things to assert itself or fulfill itself, action grounded in our spiritual awareness merely flows out of the divine abundance without regard to outcome or any need to draw attention to itself.

If we could picture our plight, then, in this usual state of our being, which spiritual masters have described as “sleep,” we could say that each one of us has a Mary deep within us, glued to the feet of the Master. There are incredible luminous depths within in which we know how to listen and to whom we are listening. But the clarity of our listening is obscured because out on the periphery we also have a Martha who thinks that the whole world is riding on her back and drowns out the inner music with her constant barrage of “I need,” “I want,” “Pay attention to me.”

The more you think from ordinary awareness, the more you experience yourself as a separate egoic identity, defined by the particular set of characteristics, aptitudes, needs, and desires that go to make up *you*. If you wish to experience what lies beneath, spiritual tradition teaches, the first step is simply to pull the plug on that constant self-reflexive activity of the mind. You could say that learning to shift to seeing with your spiritual awareness is a lot like learning to see in the dark. At first everything seems totally black. But if you’re patient and don’t grab for the flashlight, little by little you begin to discover that you can pick out shadows and shapes, and in some mysterious way “see.” If you can simply break the tyranny of your ordinary awareness, the rest will begin to unfold itself.

## Cataphatic and Apophatic Prayer

Cataphatic prayer is prayer that makes use of what theologians call our “faculties.” It engages our reason, memory, imagination, feelings, and will. These, of course, are the normal human operating systems that connect us to the outer world and to our own interior life. They are wonderful tools we have been given to make our way in this world and to experience it richly from the perspective of being a unique person with unique gifts to share and a unique relationship to God.

Cataphatic prayer corresponds to what we have earlier described as our “ordinary awareness.” It emerges out of and reinforces that unique sense of egoic selfhood.

Cataphatic prayer is most of what we are about in church. Virtually all aspects of our usual worship experience – intercessory and liturgical prayers, celebrating the Eucharist, choral singing, religious and sacred dance, belong to cataphatic prayer.

Apophatic prayer, by contrast, is prayer that does not make use of the faculties; in other words, it bypasses our capacities for reason, imagination, visualization, emotion, and memory. From the perspective of our faculties, this somewhat amorphous state may feel like emptiness or nothingness, and hence you’ll often see this kind of prayer described as “formless,” or the via negative (“the way of negation”). In point of fact, once a more subtle discrimination begins to develop in us, we learn that apophatic prayer is far from either formless or empty. It, too, makes use of faculties, but ones that are much more subtle than we’re used to and which are normally blocked by overreliance on our more usual mental and affective processing modes.

Because it bypasses our usual mental processes and the sense of selfhood attached to them, apophatic prayer corresponds to what we have earlier described as our “spiritual awareness.” It includes various forms of ecstatic and mystical prayer in which egoic perception is transcended. It also includes most forms of meditation as the term is understood in its classic sense, denoting a systematic practice of intentional silence. Centering Prayer clearly belongs to the generic category of apophatic prayer. It may not seem immediately clear why it is useful to understand this. But I am continually impressed by how much trouble this actually saves when it comes to understanding Centering Prayer’s challenging instructions about the handling of thoughts during prayer time. Only when the radically apophatic nature of Centering Prayer is recognized does it become possible to relax and really allow the prayer to unfold its deepest treasures. Most of the confusion and equivocation that can creep into the teaching of Centering Prayer, I’ve found, comes from trying to mix the streams – or in other words, from approaching apophatic prayer with a cataphatic mindset.

From the point of view of cataphatic prayer, silence will always tend to appear as an empty vessel into which God pours “content.” The purpose of keeping silence, from this perspective, is to be better able to listen to whatever content God may wish to reveal. We tend to think of silence as useful primarily as the precondition for the revelation of new insights and directives.

Apophatic prayer has a very different understanding of silence. Silence is not a backdrop for form, and diffuse, open awareness is not an empty chalice waiting to be filled with specific insights and directives. It is its own kind of perceptivity, its own kind of communion. Rather than yielding itself into form, it is more that we yield ourselves into it – just as “pieces of cloud dissolve in sunlight,” in the wonderful image of the poet Rumi. What first appears like a “nothing” to us gradually begins to become filled with its own light and intelligence, and this in turn carries us closer to our own hearts and closer to that mysterious place of interpenetration at the heart of all things. This more subtle level of perceptivity can be sustained only when the denser and noisier perceptions of our usual human faculties have fallen silent.

Father Tom Francis gives insight to the apophatic realm...

“Centering Prayer insists that the one who prays wishes to meet God as God is, directly, immediately – i.e., not mediated by any thought, prayer, reflection, or reading. And so the eyes are closed, the pray-er shuts down completely all the operations of normal consciousness, not allowing any idea, thought, or image. Thus the normal faculties of intellect, imagination, memory, and will are closed down, inoperative, and the person goes to his/her center, his/her spirit, his/her deep and true Self, his/her personhood, where he/she is made to the image of God, spirit to Spirit, in a wordless union, communion, the lover with the Beloved beyond all mediations.... It could best be called transcendent consciousness for it is the state of being in direct contact with the God who dwells within.”

In Centering Prayer, then, we leave the cataphatic world and step completely into the apophatic ground, on its own terms. Both the challenge and the opportunity, from the point of view of ordinary consciousness, is to yield ourselves fully into the embrace of the silence rather than “using” the silence to shore up the projects and goals of our ordinary awareness.

This distinction becomes crucially important as we settle down to the actual practice of Centering Prayer – because this prayer works almost entirely on the power of intention. If you really are willing to maintain that deep interior openness, releasing each thought as it comes along, then the noticing and letting go of thoughts will happen spontaneously and reliably. Whatever the “something” is deep within your unconsciousness that is engaged by your willingness to yield yourself into the silence will mysteriously remind you when you’re tangled up with a thought, and with little or no resistance you’ll allow your sacred word to release it. But if your intention gets fuzzy – i.e., if there is an incomplete willingness to release a thought; if something in you seems more interested in actually thinking it – then you’ll encounter a lot of daydreaming and a realization, if you’re honest with yourself, that you’ve simply been wasting time, sitting in a kind of smog rather than actually opening to the depths.

### The Method of Centering Prayer

As I have already remarked, ninety percent of the battle in establishing a regular discipline of meditation lies in wanting to do it in the first place. Thomas Keating rather humorously describes the process as “taking a brief vacation from yourself.” The Cloud of Unknowing calls this intention our “naked intent direct to God.” You’re in the right ballpark if you sense your aim as “to be totally open to God.” Totally available, all the way down to that innermost point of your being; deeper than your thinking, deeper than your feelings, deeper than your memories and desire, deeper than your usual psychological sense of yourself – even deeper than your presence! For ultimately, what will go on in this prayer is “in secret.”

I don’t say that the aim is to make yourself empty or make yourself still. That is impossible. Making oneself empty or still does not lie within the capacity of the mind (at least the beginner’s mind), and striving for emptiness is a surefire way to guarantee that your meditation will be a constant stream of thoughts. Emptying, however, is quite another matter. There is a repeated returning to and refocusing of your intention, just as one repeatedly refocuses a camera lens that has drifted slightly off. It is perfectly normal to have lots of thoughts. The deal is, if you catch yourself thinking, you let the thought go. A woman said to Keating: “I’m such a failure at this prayer. In twenty minutes, I’ve had ten thousand thoughts.” “How lovely!” responded Keating. “Ten thousand opportunities to return to God.” If every minute you’ve been bedeviled by thoughts, you’ve gotten a good workout of your “muscle” of surrender. A sacred word is like a little piece of string tied around your finger. It helps jog your memory, reminding you simply and promptly to let go of whatever thought your thinking and return to that “naked intent direct to God.”

The metaphor of boats on a river:

The river is your consciousness – which is in fact a constantly moving “stream.” Down it float boats, i.e., your thoughts. They may be innocent little “kayaks,” like a sudden wisp of wondering about whether you left the keys in the car. Or they may be huge battleships of raw emotion and contentiousness, such as reliving a fight you had. Or maybe they are half-sunken, waterlogged hulls barely above the surface: old hurts and memories from the past. On and on they float, down the river of your consciousness. In terms of this metaphor, the ideal way to position yourself during the time of Centering Prayer is to imagine yourself as a scuba diver seated on a rock at the bottom of the riverbed. From your perch you can look up and see the hulls of boats passing overhead. And as long as they’re simply passing by, that’s fine. You don’t have to do anything to prevent their coming and going. The temptation, however, is to get interested in a particular boat, swim up to the surface of the river, and climb on board. In other words, you get caught up in a particular thought. In place of that relaxed, detached attitude that let the boats come and go as they please, you are now being carried downstream yourself!

Centering Prayer teaching enumerates five types of “boats” that typically float by during prayer time. The first of these, wool-gathering, or “ordinary thoughts,” actually poses little challenge to your willingness to let go if you catch them quickly enough. These are the sorts of vague, meandering, often whimsical thoughts that pop into your head, typically at the beginning of the prayer period when you’re still settling down. The mind roams through its lists and categories, perhaps inventorying the contents of your bureau drawer or Palm Pilot, seeing if you can still name the presidents of the United States in order, or your own variation of these mindless daisy-chains of free association. It’s rather like a dog turning round and round in his bed before he finally flops down to rest. But the good news is that these thoughts have little emotional attraction, and pretty soon they settle down of their own accord, or else you simply tune them out – like back ground music in a department store.

The second category, somewhat more challenging, are so-called attractive thoughts, which includes, in fact attractive and repulsive thoughts. These are thoughts that come with an emotional hook in them. You may find yourself reliving that fight you had with your coworker last week (or with your mother forty years ago!) – maybe even coming up with the perfect rejoinder. Or blissfully daydreaming ahead to your upcoming get-away weekend or hiking trip, or savoring a compliment thrown your way. The telltale sign that you’ve been hooked by an attractive thought is that when that mysterious something “reminds” you of your intention to sit there in open, deep awareness, your first reaction is reluctance – “Well, just let me first finish thinking this thought, then I’ll get right back to my Centering Prayer.”

The fourth type of thought (and yes, I will get back to the third!) is self-reflection. Because the prayer works completely with intention rather than attention, it leaves the attention with no specific marching order – unlike concentrative methods, which furnish the mind with a simple, repetitive task to do like saying the mantra or following the breath. The mind, not knowing what else to put its attention on, begins to put its attention on itself, and a kind of mental mitosis ensues: “Am I in stillness?” “Is this a thought that I’m thinking?” “Who is the inner watcher that notices?” etc. The way out of this hall of mirrors is really very simple if you’re willing to be firm. There’s a basic law of consciousness that states: What you pay attention to, you energize; what you withdraw attention from loses force. If you spend your time watching the watcher, you energize the problem. If you can learn not to pay attention to it, it will eventually subside. What this means is simply to do the practice. Treat self-reflection simply like another kind of thought, and patiently let it go. The cataphatic cannot watch the apophatic; and all the mental mitosis really boils down to the struggle of ordinary awareness not to lose its grip on a process that actually goes on far more naturally without it. Once you see the truth of this, self-reflection begins to lose its hook.



The fifth category is known in Centering Prayer as “thoughts from the unconscious.” This is the category where you have to apply the word thought in its broadest possible context including emotions and sensations or these are typically what this last category consists of. Sometimes you’ll be sitting in prayer and find yourself inexplicably near tears, or even in fact crying! This may strike you as particularly odd because you weren’t aware you were sad when you sat down to do the prayer. Or occasionally you’ll find yourself in the presence of a spike of emotional or even physical pain: a raw surge of anxiety or anger, or a sudden throbbing muscle or dizziness that wasn’t there before you sat down to do the prayer. You wonder what’s going on, whether you’re going crazy. What’s going on is that the relaxed, gentle attention of Centering Prayer is allowing some interior rearrangement to go on. We all carry a lot of pain deep inside us, buried in our emotions and in our bodies. Through your willingness to “consent to the presence and action of God,” the tight repressive bands that the egoic mind keeps wrapped around these shadow places within you begin to loosen up, and some of the trapped material can release itself, most often in tears. While this may initially feel disconcerting, it is actually a sign that a process of inner healing is under way.

Without a doubt, herein lies Thomas Keating’s most profound contribution to contemporary spiritual psychology: in his recognition that Centering Prayer in some mysterious but undeniable way helps to initiate a process of psychological healing that he calls “the Divine Therapy.” We will look at this more later. For now, it’s enough simply to offer the reassurance that this “unloading of the unconsciousness” is all perfectly normal and typically quite gentle – so gentle that most people in the early stages of learning the prayer do not notice it at all.

The Art of Letting Go. The goal in Centering Prayer is not to stop the thoughts, but simply to develop a detached attitude toward them. As long as they are coming and going of their own accord, there is no need to be constantly repeating your Sacred Word. The Word is only used to help you jump off the boat and swim back down to your little diver’s rock once you realize you’ve been caught. There is a simple formula called “The Four Rs”: Resist no thought, Retain no thought, React to no thought, Return to the sacred word. *Resist no thought* means just that. The stream of consciousness is constantly moving along, and without specialized training it is nearly impossible for most people to keep their mind on a single thought for more than two minutes. The good news in this is that by the time a thought emerges into consciousness, it’s already on the way out! If you don’t feed it with commentary or reaction, it will soon enough move on of its own accord. *Retain no thought* is the other side of the same coin: “You catch yourself thinking, you let the thought go.” *React to no thought* means to let go of the thought without internal commentary or self-criticism, which so often merely results in turning an innocent thought into an emotionally charged scenario. An emotionally charged thought is a lot harder to let go than a simple woolgathering or daydream. *Return to the sacred word* means simply to say your word again (or allow it to say itself) as a symbol of your willingness to release whatever the particular thought may be and return to your state of open awareness.

While it is hard to describe exactly how this happens, it is quite normal in Centering Prayer to know that thoughts are going on, but to know as well that you have absolutely no attraction to them. It’s as if two scenarios are going on at once, but you honestly know that the activity at the surface is in no way disrupting your quietly gathered being at the depths. For as long as this state of simultaneity lasts, it’s fine to let it be, but if the balance shifts and the surface begins to exert its attraction, simply allow your Sacred Word to return you to those apophatic depths. If you’re doing the practice of Centering Prayer faithfully and consistently, letting go of the thoughts as you notice them, not worrying too much and not getting too tangled up in self-reflection, what you are actually patterning into yourself is a very important piece of spiritual learning: that access to the apophatic realm is somehow related to this act of letting go – or surrender, to give it its true spiritual name.

Spiritual Non-Possessiveness Let us return now to the third category. It poses the most serious challenges for those approaching Centering Prayer from traditional Christian cataphatic starting points. This third category is known in Centering Prayer teaching as “insights and illuminations” – to which I add a third tempter: “intercessions.” There was a group leader in Maine who would close each session of Centering Prayer with the question “And what message did God give you during your time of Centering Prayer?” It is a deep and persistent proclivity of our Judeo-Christian tradition to regard silence as a back drop for listening for messages. And it is hard to erase this cataphatic programming from our hearts and our expectations. So you’ll be sitting in Centering Prayer, and suddenly out of that luminous openness something will begin to emerge into form. It may be an insight, either psychological or spiritual. Perhaps the key sentence you need for a speech you’ve been working on will pop into your mind. Or you’ll suddenly understand a piece of your psychological past that has always eluded you: where your fear of heights came from, or why you get so enraged when you perceive yourself being undercut. Or perhaps the discernment you’ve been waiting for about whether to say yes or no to that new job. This illumination can also be deeply devotional or mystical. As you sit there surrounded by all that blessedness, the instructions of Centering Prayer – “When you catch yourself thinking, you let the thought go” – seem not only harsh, but plain old wrong. Isn’t this the mother lode? Isn’t this what silence is actually for: to bring us into the rich presence of God where we can receive the “daily bread” that God intends for us?

So it is important to be very, very clear as to why those seemingly harsh instructions of Centering Prayer are not only correct but in fact crucial, and to offer reassurances that what is seemingly lost in the letting go – even if it seems like letting go of the pot of gold at the end of rainbow – is more than compensated for by what is found. Centering Prayer is based on very sound apophatic theology, and if you’re willing to trust it, it will take you all the way there. First, a very practical reassurance: Don’t worry – any genuine insights or messages revealed during Centering Prayer will be back in conscious form. Apophatic prayer is sacred space for God as well as human beings, and the divine does not use this space to play striptease with us! Typically, an insight or message that is emerging from the unconscious into your conscious attention will make its way up as inexorably as crabgrass growing through the tarmac. If it is real, it will be back. Conversely, many of the insights and visions that seem so compelling to us in prayer time turn out to be chimera: just like dreams that seem so real to us while we’re dreaming them, but we awake to say, “Well, what was that all about?” Throughout this entire category of insights, illuminations, and intercessions, we have to suspect that the principal operative is really the old cliché “The ego abhors a vacuum.” From the viewpoint of ordinary (or cataphatic) awareness, the apophatic will always appear to be a vacuum, and your ego will incessantly try to fill up this vacuum with content. If you grab onto an insight or illumination, or succumb to the temptation to pray for everyone then and there, what you have actually done is to allow yourself to be dragged out of the apophatic back into the cataphatic. Contemplative teaching emphasizes that this is never worth the price. By your willingness to stay with the apophatic at all costs during the time of this prayer you are strengthening and deepening an attitude of soul that will protect you and carry you all the way: the attitude of spiritual non-possessiveness.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” suggests the centrality of this quality of spiritual non-possessiveness to Jesus’ teaching and to his life. He touches it again during that first temptation in the wilderness in his determination not to turn stones into bread, and still again during his arrest and crucifixion through his refusal to rescue himself. Our natural inclination, of course, is to grab on: to help ourselves and build ourselves up. “Spiritual materialism” is a name we could use. Basically, it means the tendency to help ourselves to spiritual experience in order to build up our cataphatic, or ordinary, self. If time spent in those apophatic depths yields up new information about ourselves, we want to quickly get it all down in our journal.

Or if it gives us wonderful experiences of intimate presence with God, we want to savor them and allow them to deepen our own trust and sense of being specially loved by God. It is an immature stage of practice, something like a crutch. While the leg is broken, the crutch is useful for helping us get around, but if we hang onto it after the leg is healed, it really slows us down. If we do not grow beyond the attitude of spiritual materialism, it leaves us with some very different habits to unlearn. And if we really can't or won't leave the cataphatic safety zone, it will eventually limit the level of selfhood we are able to realize to the egoic self and make the unitive consciousness that we taste and yearn for impossible to sustain.

Disciplining the Imagination In our Western culture, imagination is almost universally and indiscriminately assumed to be a good thing. But in the classic spiritual teachings of our Christian tradition, the desert fathers and mothers spent much time struggling with the imagination and taught emphatically that it is only through the imagination that the demonic can gain access. Temptation can only enter us, contemplative tradition insists, through our fantasies, daydreams and commentary thoughts. If we can learn to simply say "no" to these, not take the bait, there is no way that the "passions" (fear, envy, anger, pride, etc.) can get hold of us. The "demonic" entry point is always by using the imagination to stir up those emotional reactions. Fundamentalists tend to be wary of those sometimes swirling and dark thoughts that emerge from the shadow side of our being and from the human libido itself. Their strategy is to keep a strong hold on the conscious mind, using the superego to suppress the unconscious. But Centering Prayer teaches a much kinder, gentler, and more time-tested way: we can allow anything to come up out of the unconsciousness, and it will have absolutely no hold on us as long as we are willing to let go of it. If we don't grab it, it can't grab us. It is utterly true that the practice of not clinging to the creations of the imagination will allow us to stand deeply and quietly gathered in the heart of God, no matter what outer or inner storms may assail us.

Our usual sense of self emerges from a subject/object polarity. From this usual vantage point, it appears that we "have" spiritual experiences, which then contribute to "our" insight, illumination, and eventually full enlightenment. From this perspective, more is better, and enlightenment looks quantitative: when we've acquired "enough" we will emerge into the final stage of our human personhood, traditionally called in Christianity the "unitive" stage. But the trap in this scenario is that dualistic-based selfhood cannot possibly attain unitive consciousness. Ultimately, we cannot have our cake and eat it too, and to step into full unitive consciousness requires letting go of that lesser consciousness which would prefer to revel in its own experience. To arrive at this unified whole, there is only one route to get there, and it is known to all the spiritual traditions of the world: dying to self. The self who "has" experiences must finally be let go, as consciousness steps out into the bare, positionless freedom which is unity. One does not "snatch" at insights, illuminations, experiences, because the only known route to unitive freedom is in the dying, moving toward less. You do not die on a cross in order to "set up" the resurrection; you die on a cross because the willingness to give it all away is itself the original and ultimate creative act from which all being flows. Just as cataphatic awareness reinforces a cataphatic sense of self, so apophatic awareness connects us up to an apophatic sense of self. As long as it feels to us as if apophatic prayer is simply sitting there in darkness, we will not be able to directly experience why it is virtuous to do so, and the temptation to hang on to "juicy" thoughts will remain. Apophatic darkness is neither "dark" nor "empty" nor "formless." It is filled with subtle perceptive faculties, and kind of intuitive hologram knowingness which is the core motion of unitive consciousness and the foundation of unitive selfhood. Once this truth begins to be glimpsed, apophatic practice ceases to be a burden and begins to sparkle with the joy of discovery and immanence of encounter. "In the center of one's nothingness one meets the infinitely real" says Merton.

Centering Prayer and Christian Tradition

*Meeting the Contemplative Jesus* It seems safe to assume that Jesus was a contemplative, by which I mean that the intentional alternation between contemplation and action is one of the fundamental rhythms of his being. At all the great junctures of his life – in the first temptations in the wilderness, in his withdrawal to the far shores of Lake Galilee immediately preceding the miracle of the loaves and fishes, at his transfiguration on Mt. Tabor and at the final anguish in the garden of Gethsemane – his pattern is to withdraw into solitude to listen more deeply to the word of God and unite his being to the divine Will. Whether this was a cataphatic or an apophatic listening is not specified, of course, but, in the light of Jesus' own deepest self-disclosure, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30), we know that the place of oneness is touched at the apophatic rather than the cataphatic level, and can, I think, safely assume that the prayer which Jesus prayed in these solitary times and places was an inter-communion of his and his Father's divine consubstantiality rather than a request for discernment or marching orders. In this teaching on prayer in Matthew 6:5ff., Jesus emphasizes that true prayer is offered "in secret": "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men.... But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Clearly, at a literal level it is talking about motivation in prayer: moving away from an external, egoic sort of prayer, whose major agenda is to have oneself perceived by others as devout, into a sincerity of heart that is shared between oneself and God alone. But if the text is taken metaphorically, the passage gives a perfectly accurate description of the actual method of apophatic prayer, or meditation. "Go into your room and close the door" would correspond to entering that "cave of your heart" (as the desert fathers would later dub it) and closing the door to "the faculties," or ordinary awareness. "Your Father who is in secret" suggests a being-to-being communion in that apophatic band of receptivity, hidden from the prying gaze of our outer faculties and gathered in the heart of divine love, which is in fact reward in itself, as the passage suggests. This may be scriptural evidence that Jesus both practiced and taught a form of meditation.

*The dessert fathers and mothers* By the early fourth century, as the Christian Church found itself suddenly catapulted from forbidden cult to imperial religion, some/many entered the deserts of Egypt and Syria looking for ways to authentically practice their faith. The actual prayer and meditation practices of the desert monks, we could characterize as an attempt to live out fully Paul's exhortation to "pray without ceasing" through the discipline of living in constant remembrance of God. The cornerstone, both in prayer and in daily life, was the practice of attention. In daily life, where a monk earned his keep through simple chores such as plaiting rope, the goal was to learn to keep one's mind entirely on what one was doing, without the intrusion of fantasy, daydreaming, or inner commentaries. (In daily life actions, and in prayer,) one comes out in the same place: in the complete transcendence of the egoic realm and the opening of one's heart to God. In "contemplation," and "resting in God," all the mental and even emotional work is suspended. The faculties are stilled, and one simply rests in the presence of the divine. The faculties are left behind and one simply enters the stillness.

Ephesians 3: 16-19 is really the charter of contemplative prayer: "I pray that out of his glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled with the very nature of God."

The Theology of Centering Prayer

Dying to self. This is of course a foundational teaching, modeled in Jesus' life even more than in his words, and as Christians we are bound to emulate it. Our life is to be a continuous "dying to self": a voluntary relinquishing of a smaller or more relative life in order to actualize a larger and more permanent one. But what kind of dying is Jesus really talking about here? In classic Christian moral theology, dying to self is generally interpreted as dying to self-will. In other words, we all have our wants, needs, preferences, opinions, and agendas, some of which may be authentic expressions of our being but many of which are motivated (or at least aggravated) by fear and self-importance. Dying to self means being willing to let go of what I want (or think I want) in order to create space for God to direct, lead, and guide me into a truer way of being. "Not my will but thine be done." This is certainly an important and valid way of understanding what dying to self is. But is there another way, one that penetrates still deeper into the existential dimension of this teaching?

Father Laurence Freeman says: "Every time we meditate, we participate in the death of Christ." He is quite right. The practice of meditation is indeed an authentic experience of dying to self: our core sense of identity and the egoic processing methods that keep it in place. When we enter meditation, it is like a "mini-death," at least from the perspective of the ego (which is why it can initially feel so scary). We let go of our self-talk, our interior dialogue, our fears, wants, needs, preferences, daydreams, and fantasies. These all become just "thoughts," and we learn to let them go. We simply entrust ourselves to a deeper aliveness, gently pulling the plug on that tendency of the mind to want to check in with itself all the time. In this sense, meditation is a mini-rehearsal for the hour of our own death, in which the same thing will happen. There comes a moment when the ego is no longer able to hold us together, and our identity is cast to the mercy of Being itself. This is the existential experience of "losing one's life."

I think the inference is obvious: Just as in meditation we participate in the death of Christ, we also participate in his resurrection. At the end of those twenty or so minutes of sitting, we are still here! For twenty minutes we have not been holding ourselves in life, and yet life remains. Something has held us and carried us. And this same something, we gradually come to trust, will hold and carry us at the hour of our death. To know this – really know this – is the beginning of resurrection life. As I mentioned earlier, virtually all the great spiritual traditions of the world share the conviction that humanity is the victim of a tragic case of mistaken identity. There is a "self" and a Self, and our fatal mistake lies in confusing the two. The egoic self, or cataphatic self, is in virtually every spiritual tradition immediately dispatched to the realm of the illusory, or at best, transitory. It is the imposter who claims to be the whole. This imposter can become a good servant, but it is a dangerous master. Awakening – which in Jesus' teaching really boils down to the capacity to perceive and act in accordance with the higher laws of the Kingdom of Heaven – is a matter of piercing through the charade of the smaller self to develop a stable connection with the greater Self. In terms we have been using in this book, this means becoming intimate with our spiritual identity, the sense of selfhood carried in our spiritual awareness. Whenever we make this shift from egoic to spiritual awareness, we are authentically "losing our life" – even if it is only for the duration of the meditation period!

Once this existential dimension is seen, it not only reorients the roadmap but also puts in our hands important practical tools for transformation. The role of meditation in service of the gospel becomes much more clear: it creates a bridge between these two levels of awareness within us, offering a consistent and reliable way of practicing the passage from small self to greater Self. When, during the time of meditation, angry or frightened or self-justifying thoughts arise, we use whatever method our practice teaches to help us stay clear of attachment (which drags us immediately back to our smaller self) and connected to that deeper level of awareness. With

patience and persistence, these skills first patterned in meditation can be transferred to “real life” so that we actually begin to live like the Good Samaritan, the woman at the well, or the generous father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Through meditation it gradually becomes ingrained in us that “losing one’s life,” regardless of the action that may ultimately be required of us in the outer world, entails first and foremost a passage from our ordinary awareness to our spiritual one, because only at this deeper level of non-fear based, wholistic perception will we be able to understand what is actually required of us. In fact, more than a few recent writers have suggested that Jesus’ well-loved Kingdom of Heaven is none other than this: life lived from the perspective of an attained spiritual awareness.

Kenosis. Kenosis means self-emptying. It encapsulates the core gesture of Jesus’ life. Paul sets forth the principle of kenosis in his beautiful hymn in Philippians 2, prefacing his comments by saying, “Let what was seen in Christ Jesus be seen also in you”: “Though his state was that of God, yet he did not claim equality with God something he should cling to. Rather, he emptied himself, and assuming the state of a slave, he was born in human likeness. He being known as one of us, Humbled himself obedient unto death – even death on a cross.” In this profound theological reflection, Paul sees that self-emptying is the touchstone. Self-emptying is the path. Jesus modeled it in the garden of Gethsemane. When surrounded by fear, contradiction, betrayal; when the “fight or flight’ alarm bells are going off in your head and everything inside you wants to brace and defend itself, the infallible way to extricate yourself and reclaim your home in that sheltering kingdom is simply to freely release whatever you are holding onto – including, if it comes to this, life itself. The method of full, voluntary self-donation reconnects you instantly to the wellspring; in fact, it is the wellspring. The most daring gamble of Jesus’ trajectory of pure love may just be to show us that self-emptying is not the means to something else; the act is itself the full expression of its meaning and instantly brings into being “a new creation”: the integral wholeness of Love manifested in the particularity of a human heart. In kenosis consciousness reclaims dominion over energy. The pathway to freedom, to the realized unity of our being, lies in and in fact is coextensive with the sacramental act of giving it all away, making “self-giving” the core gesture through which all the meaning, purpose, and nobility of our human life is ultimately conveyed.

Centering Prayer approximates meditational kenosis. It is pure self-emptying. In Centering Prayer, one aims to attain nothing: not clear mind, steady-state consciousness, or unitive seeing. It is a prayer that simply exercises the kenotic path: love made full in the act of giving itself away. Apart from this grounding in kenosis, the practice of Centering Prayer may not fully make sense. It is a willing divestment of all possessions even up to and including personal consciousness. Slowly, steadily, Centering Prayer patterns into its practitioners what I would call the quintessential Jesus response: the meeting of any and all life situations (including the final one, where a concentrative method is no longer possible) by the complete, free giving of oneself. So understood, its compatibility with Christianity is not only clear, but inescapable.

### The Psychology of Centering Prayer. The Divine Therapy

Because Centering Prayer is a surrender method, controls on unconscious energies are relaxed. This fosters an “unloading of the unconscious.” It becomes a catalyst for the purification and healing of the unconscious. One begins to dismantle the “false self,” i.e., the needy, driven, unrecognized motivations that govern most of our untransformed human behaviour. Beginning in infancy (or even before) each of us, in response to perceived threats to our well-being, develops a false self: a set of protective behaviours driven at root by a sense of need and lack. The essence of the false self is driven, addictive energy, consisting of tremendous emotional investment in compensatory “emotional programs for happiness,” as Keating calls them. It is the false self that

we bring to the spiritual journey; our “true self” lies buried beneath the accretions and defenses. In all of us there is a huge amount of healing that has to take place before our deep and authentic quest for union with God – which requires tremendous courage and inner presence to sustain – escapes the gravitational pull of our psychological woundedness and self-justification. This, in essence, constitutes the spiritual journey.

As one sits in centering prayer with the intent to rest in and trust in God, the unconscious begins to unload “the emotional junk of a lifetime.” Repressed memories, pain, accumulated dull hurt rise to the surface and are, through the attitude of gentle consent, allowed to depart. Keating says: *“The level of deep rest accessed during the prayer period loosens up the hardpan around the emotional weeds stored in the unconscious, of which the body seems to be the ware-house. The psyche begins to evacuate spontaneously the undigested emotional material of a lifetime, opening up new space for self-knowledge, freedom of choice, and the discovery of the divine presence within. As a consequence, a growing trust in God, a bonding with the Divine Therapist, enables us to endure the process.”* “Thus,” he continues, “the gift of contemplative prayer is a practical and essential tool for confronting the heart of the Christian asceticism – namely, the struggle with our unconscious motivation – while at the same time establishing the climate and necessary dispositions for a relationship with God and leading, if we persevere, to divine union.

As these wounds are gradually surfaced and released in prayer (one simply lets them go non-possessively, rather than retaining them for inspection as in psychoanalysis), more and more the false self weakens and the true self gradually emerges. We are used to thinking of spiritual transformation as an ascent. The effects of a spiritual practice, we expect, are to make us calmer, more able to cope, more filled with equanimity. The Divine Therapy model, however, suggests a different scenario: that the ascent is inextricably bound to a descent into the ground of our own psyche (this would be the principle of kenosis viewed from a psychological standpoint). Thus, periods of psychological ferment and destabilization are signs that the journey is progressing, not that it is a failure. As a practice of meditational prayer loosens repressed material in the unconscious, the initial fruits of spiritual practice may not be the expected peace and enlightenment, but destabilization and the emergence into consciousness of considerable pain.

In my own practice of this prayer, I have learned by repeated experience that the “reward” for a period of committed sitting is often the emergence of a patch of pain long buried and several days of emotional turmoil. Keating calls it “the archeological dig.” As trust grows in God and practice becomes more stable, we penetrate deeper and deeper down to the bedrock of pain, the origin of our personal false self. The results are often personally horrifying, but again, says Keating, this does not mean that the spiritual journey is a failure, but that it is doing its job. Keating says: “Centering Prayer will reduce anxiety for perhaps the first three months. But once the unconscious starts to unload, it will give you more anxiety than you ever had in your life.” Keating has rescued us from the violence of traditional metaphors, based on renunciation, vigilance, and “spiritual warfare” (as if a part of us had to be killed, or at least thoroughly locked up, in order for holiness to grow). In the “Divine Therapy” spiritual transformation is gentle, and it always holds paramount the need for integration of psyche and spirit. The one cannot dominate the other; they must proceed apace. If the spirit’s role is to be strong, the psyche’s is to be vulnerable, and the lion must lie down with the lamb before the peaceable kingdom will reign within. Throughout the entire teaching, the touchstones are gentleness, patience, consent, and a willingness to let the process of integration unfold with its own pace and authenticity. Of course there is woundedness, but there is holiness as well. How the two come together – not which one wins, but how they join – constitutes the unique and profound meaning of one’s life: the emergence out of the maelstrom of the true self, transformed in Christ.

Healing the Ego or Transcending It?

Classical psychotherapy takes place within the domain of egoic functioning; its goal is to improve it. Weak and damaged egos gain self-esteem, and overly defended ones learn to relax and enjoy the ride. Classic spiritual work, on the other hand, no matter what the religious tradition, is about transcending the ego. It seeks to awaken within a person something that is recognized as “true self,” or higher Self. This does not necessarily mean eliminating the ego, but rather displacing it as the seat of one’s personal identity. For Thomas Merton the ego is *per se* the false self: the part that mistakes itself for the whole and creates its own reality in ignorance of (or defiance of) its connection to divine being. For Thomas Keating, the false self is always wounded; it comes into being specifically as a defense mechanism against perceived threats and deprivations during infancy and early childhood (and even in the womb). Keating also develops a model or theory of “programs of emotional happiness” that arise from wounding and egoic functioning. In and of itself, there is no harm in high egoic functioning. But the danger lies in confusing the sense of “wellness” that comes from relief of neurotic symptoms – and the ego still solidly in its comfort zone – with the “grace beyond grace” that comes from genuine ego transcendence. The healthy ego must never be mistaken for the true self. It does not somehow evolve into the true self. Whether healthy or unhealthy, the ego is still the ego and as such is still inescapably tied to the domain of the lower, or provisional, selfhood. The ego or false self is trapped within its basic operating system: it sees the world through the subject/object polarity.

Whatever “true self” may look like when described theologically, operationally it involves the shift to a different kind of consciousness (called non-dual or “unitive” in classic Christian terminology), which flows out from that deeper place within us, described earlier as our “apophatic awareness.” Inner awakening always begins through an awakening of the connection with that deeper, more unboundaried consciousness within us – as in Centering Prayer, of course. The shift from egoic to transcendent or “true” self has traditionally been carried out in inner work through the development of a stable “witnessing” presence or inner observer. Without this presence, even the healing that comes from deep purification and surrender won’t spontaneously transmute into unitive consciousness.

I suggest we look at our being trapped in the false self and the false self system not as sin or as pathology. What if the reservoir of human darkness is not so much a disease as the raw material of our transformation; or in other words, without the false self system as the precondition of our humanity, there would be no journey and no transformation? True self comes into being as a kind of sacred alchemy, through the conscious acceptance and integration of our shadow side. It is not so much the curing of a pathology as the birthing of something that would never have existed apart from struggle. We need to remember that ego-healing and ego-transcendence happen simultaneously not sequentially along the path of our lives, and that our wounds, entrusted to the divine mercy, can become the stimulus to extraordinary growth. The divine therapy as metaphor needs to keep its feet firmly planted in the strong Biblical conviction that creation is good, and that the Fall, while it may have tarnished the likeness of God in the human person (i.e., the fully realized manifestation of the Divine Indwelling), in no way destroyed the image, the Divine Indwelling itself. “The glory of God is a human being fully alive,” said Bishop Irenaeus in the third century. The human condition exists for a purpose far more majestic and compelling than simply getting well.

Attention of the Heart – Presence

The term “attention of the heart” comes from Simeon the New Theologian, a Greek Orthodox spiritual master of the late tenth century. Essentially, Simeon insisted on the dimension of conscious presence in our human relationship with the divine. For example, he argued that the quality of attention of the priest affects the validity of the mass. It is obvious to nearly everyone that



a mass rattled off by rote by a priest doing six of them in one day, while it may remain theologically valid, is missing an essential element. Presence, or as Simeon calls it, “attention of the heart,” is the capacity to be fully engaged at every level of one’s being: alive and simultaneously present to both God and the situation at hand. Developing attention of the heart (presence) is all-important, Simeon maintains, because without it, one would be incapable of carrying out the gospel. The gospel can not be carried out if one just has ordinary awareness. Only when the mind is “in the heart,” grounded and tethered in that deeper wellspring of spiritual awareness, is it possible to live the teachings of Jesus without hypocrisy or burnout. The gospel requires a radical openness and compassion that are beyond the capacity of the anxious, fear-ridden ego.

Simeon, though, saw it as a fault if someone just tried to be present by trying to stay mentally attentive. Such a practitioner would “remain in the head, whereas evil thoughts are generated in the heart.” In other words, the aspiring seeker is likely to be blindsided by the strength of his unconscious impulses, and the deeply imprinted response pattern of seeking refuge in the watcher, or “observing I,” runs the risk of dissociation – “making a religion of one’s better moments.” Simeon’s way was more the way of surrender. Attention of the heart (presence) is achieved not so much by concentration of either the emotions or the mind as by the simple release of all that one is clinging to, the good things as well as the bad things. As a person sits in Centering Prayer attempting to “resist no thought, retain no thought, react to no thought,” he or she is actually progressing in small (but utterly real) increments toward “freedom from all cares” and “the absence of passionate attachments.”

The poet Philip Booth said “How you get there is where you’ll arrive.” Surrender methods arrive at purity of heart. They get there by way of relinquishing the passions and relaxing the will. Centering Prayer is a surrender practice, and within the terms of this method even that fierce grip on conscious presence becomes merely another thing one is clinging to. It, too, is gently let go, as one simply entrusts oneself to the deeper level. Throughout this book I have returned again and again to the theme of Centering Prayer as a gesture of self-emptying. I also describe Centering Prayer as a totally “win-win” situation. Whatever happens to you during the prayer time is just fine. If there are few thoughts and you plunge immediately into a deep stillness, then your prayer that day is an immersion in blessedness. If the thoughts come as insistently as mosquitoes buzzing around your head and you’re still doing the best you can to let go, then great! You are getting a good aerobic workout of your “muscle” of consent.

Every time you are willing to release a thought, to perform the gesture of self-emptying, this gesture is patterned and strengthened within you. In time, with patience and persistence, it begins to take shape as a magnetic center within you, a deeper pull or gravitation that is clearly perceptible, like a tug to center. There comes a point on the learning curve of Centering Prayer – and it is a very important milestone in the “progress” of this prayer – when you will find yourself attracted to a thought but immediately and willingly let it go because you instantly recognize that the thought will pull you back up to the surface, to a vibration that is less intense and less real than what you are presently engaged with. Your emerging magnetic center is increasingly recognized as the actual inner pulsation of a mutual yearning, yours for God and God’s for you. The center begins to quicken, to take on a life of its own

Not long afterward, you may begin to sense that center calling you even when you are not officially at prayer. In the midst of daily life, even as you move about in your ordinary awareness, you will notice the pulse of that underlying mutual yearning honing you to center. Even as you go about your daily activities, you can sense it as a deeper life tugging and fluttering within you, reminding you of the greater life to which you belong. Centering Prayer is well named in this respect, because its most powerful physiological effect is that it will tend to develop in you a kind of habitual gravitation from within that is constantly calling you to your depths. In a surrender

practice, this is how attention of the heart becomes physically embodied. Thomas Merton once remarked: “The real freedom is to be able to come and go from that center and to do without anything that is not immediately connected to that center.” For in point of fact, magnetic center will carry you home. It is indeed your interior compass, the needle of your heart pointing to the magnetic north of God. When the inner alignment is strong and steady, you find that you are able to follow the course of your own authentic unfolding with a kind of effortless grace. When the signal gets dim or you forget to listen, it’s a pretty safe bet that you’ve wandered off course.

### Working with an Inner Observer

In classical spiritual training, authentic “work on self” begins with the development of a strong inner observer or witness. “You can’t move a plank you’re standing on!” As long as ordinary awareness is the only awareness you know, there is really no possibility of shifting the weight of your being from its egoic orbit to true center. The most you can hope for is a “healthy ego”: reasonably in touch with its own boundaries and respectful of the boundaries of others. Most spiritual teachers link the inner observer with a state they call presence, or in other words, an active awareness of Being itself. Rather than getting lost in the contents of consciousness, you learn to pay attention to the field of consciousness as well – not just the boats floating down the river, but to the river itself. Out of this simultaneous awareness, a whole new sense of “I” emerges: no longer identified with each passing impulse or emotional reaction, but deeply planted in Being itself. The inner observer carries this new sense of “I” and is thus the bridge between egoic awareness and deeper Selfhood.

What Is It – an Inner Observer? First and foremost, your inner observer is not the interiorized voice of your superego, nor is it your higher egoic self psycho-analyzing your false self. If the word “should” appears anywhere in your messages, you’ve got the superego instead. It is not the voice of judgment in you, and it has absolutely nothing to do with correct action. It is not self-awareness in the usual sense – rather, it is Self-awareness, in the sense of shifting your center of gravity from its usual egoic orbit to a deeper place, which essentially watches through you, from the perspective of Being itself. The distinctive feature of the inner observer is that it is non-identified; it can watch what is going on without grabbing on to the contents or claiming the process for itself. In inner work, the goal is to gain some space between, say a feeling like anger, and that deeper sense of your own selfhood. You realize the feeling is not you. You as consciousness are far deeper and more stable than the passing riot of moods, feelings, and agendas.

The classic name for this state in spiritual work is “doubled awareness,” which means the capacity to be simultaneously present, without prejudice, to both the contents of consciousness and the field itself. In Centering Prayer you have already been practicing this drill in its apophatic version as you work with the instruction, “Whenever a thought comes up, let it go,” you begin to discover that you in fact do have the capacity to separate; when a thought comes up, you can “just say no.” Obviously, then, you are not just your thoughts; that mysterious “chooser” in you must emerge from a much deeper and steadier will at the center of your being. Work with an inner observer simply extends this core insight into daily life.

The risk in attempting to hold the inner observer in your mind is that it can too easily lead to dissociation. It is all too easy to use the “ivory tower” of the inner observer, perched at the top of one’s head, to go out of contact with the messier and darker feelings swirling up from one’s unconscious. Unfortunately, feelings unacknowledged do not go away; they just go deeper. This is where “attention of the heart” is so profoundly helpful. Along this heart pathway, double awareness is not a matter of division, but a kind of multiplication, a simultaneity. The inner observer is not carried in the conscious mind being conscious of itself, but lower in your being, in magnetic center. You do not “do” anything; you merely align yourself with magnetic center (the Spirit within you)

which becomes the vessel of the witnessing presence.

The inner observer is there to connect the two worlds in you. It is not, as frequently assumed, a way of bailing out of your small self into your larger self, escaping the horizontal axis of your being in favor of the vertical. Rather, it lives at the intersection of the two axes, and its purpose is to bring them into meaningful alignment. As I said earlier, its job is to be simultaneously present, without prejudice, to both the contents of consciousness and the field itself. This is an important corrective to our usual notion of what spiritual awakening is all about. It is commonly thought that the goal is to override or destroy the lower, or egoic, self and replace it with the higher self. But this is really not what is intended. What is intended is the marriage of the two, so that the lower with its essential uniqueness and the higher with its transpersonal brilliance come together as a true individuality. The witness is not about dissociation. It is not about “making a religion out of one’s better moments,” using the higher self to suppress the lower self. In fact, as virtually all genuine spiritual teachers insist, its real function is to bring you into a state of presence, to back you down out of your mind into a full embodiment of your being, so you can feel that the “I am” that courses through God and Jesus is coursing through you as well.

Even more strongly, its purpose is to bring you into a state of unconditional presence, so that you not only believe but know that no physical or emotional state has the power to knock you out of presence. It is not a matter of replacing negative emotions with positive emotions – only of realizing that through magnetic center, presence can be sustained regardless of whatever inner or outer storms may assail you. You do not have to make the terror or anger or grief go away; you simply have to hunker down in magnetic center and allow the surface of life to be as it is. Amazingly, you discover that at the depths Being still holds firm. From an inner work perspective, this is the state Paul is describing when he writes “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The most important thing to keep reminding yourself about the inner observer is that it is not judgmental and heavy, but essentially playful. If a person has just pushed your buttons and your blood is boiling, it may suddenly occur to you, “What would happen if I didn’t react in the usual way?” It likes to win more and more of you away from conditioned reactions and the usual self-justifications into the adventure of Being itself. From the standpoint of the inner observer, life is a vast realm of consciousness to be explored and fulfilled, and its real job is to keep you on your toes. With practice you may be able to notice when your buttons are being pushed or you find yourself slipping into self-pity or self-righteousness, but noticing it doesn’t necessarily make the mood shift. Sometimes the very best you can do is to stay present to what you’re seeing, including enduring the gap in yourself between seeing and being able to do. To try to shift into “fix-it” mode will throw you out of your inner observer and back into your superego.

But no conscious seeing is ever wasted. If all you can do is wave goodbye to yourself as you go over the waterfall, this is a billion times more important than changing anything. Seeing creates a new relationship with yourself, and eventually that new relationship will bear fruit in the power to do. But doing is never the point. Every seeing, no matter how calamitous to the ego, is an enhancement of Being, a strengthening of the connection of the worlds within you. If these points are kept in mind, you will begin to develop a whole new way of living within yourself, and your life will change. The observing “I,” carried in magnetic center, becomes the integral point of your being, and around this center intentional and conscious true self begins to manifest.

The Welcoming Prayer

Welcoming Practice is Centering Prayer's powerful companion piece for turning daily life into a virtually limitless field for inner awakening.

The False Self in Action

The "False Self in Action" is a wonderfully insightful little piece of analysis about why life lived out of ordinary awareness has the distinct impression of being a vicious circle. The three "energy centers" or "the emotional programs for happiness" (1) of security/survival; esteem/affection; power/control, comprise the basic building blocks of the false self-system. They are called "energy centers" because unconsciously a huge amount of our psychic energy is bound up in identification with these programs. These unconscious programs percolate into consciousness in the form of attachments and aversions (2). Attachments are things you need to feel safe and comfortable (and these can be ideas and values as much as or even more than physical objects); aversions are those things that "push your buttons." These attachments and aversions, semi-conscious and mostly cloaked in self-justification, virtually guarantee that we will enter situations in life with "hidden values," or as they're called on the diagram, hidden agendas (3). You may think you're joining the altar guild because you want to serve your church, but underneath, and largely unbeknownst to you, you may have a self-esteem program running: wanting to be appreciated and seen as a "good" person. Or perhaps a power/control program: to be in charge of an important committee and make sure things are done properly.

From this point on, the circle begins to run its inevitable course. "The problem with a power/control program is that you're only in competition with about two or three million other people in the world." There seems to be a karmic law that hidden agendas will attract their corresponding "triggering event" or "troubling situation." (4). If you've taken on that altar guild job, for example, with the hidden agenda of being seen as an important person in the church, you can virtually guarantee that someone else on the committee will be running that same program and you'll find yourselves on a collision course. At this next stage (5), frustration starts to set in, usually obliquely at first. Perhaps you'll be aware of a mounting sense of irritation as you watch this person cutting you off in discussions or making a successful play for the sympathy of other committee members. Perhaps you'll hear her voice get more high-pitched and insistent – yours as well. At this point, what happens next is usually automatic. That flickering sense of irritation will soon fill in as full-blown emotion as you recognize, "I'm very angry!" At this point of "afflictive emotions (6) you are fully identified with the feeling of anger and your defenses are swiftly building. Almost immediately thereafter, you will begin to hear the "commentaries" go off in your mind (7). Keating calls these the "pre-recorded tapes"; they are the stories and self-talk we've all programmed into ourselves to meet life's reversals with our own unique brew of self-pity and self-justification. "How dare she!" "Every time I try to help out, this always happens!" "No one appreciates me." "How can a person like that call herself a Christian?" "My mother always told me I couldn't get along with others," and so on.

The combination of feelings and commentary is like gasoline poured on fire; it keeps the flames leaping higher and higher. Before long this full rolling boil of emotion begins to have its effect on your body (8). You may find yourself with a splitting headache or a churning stomach. It may take hours or even days for you to settle down. Carried in your bloodstream and your muscle tension, this frustration goes back down into the unconscious (9), where it merely reinforces the false self programs that gave rise to it in the first place (1). The next time you stick your nose out and volunteer for committee work, you are likely to be even more defended, even more desperately identified with your hidden agendas – and hence, even more likely to attract the same frustrating

result. Welcome to the Ferris wheel of the false self system! This is essentially a full-blown enactment of “ordinary unconscious” In classical theological language we like to think of human beings as having “free will” – the ability to make conscious choices. But according to the false self in action picture, humans beings in the grip of their false self programs are totally and predictably mechanical.

Inner awakening is basically about breaking this cycle, opening to a new infusion of self-restraint or awakened consciousness that knocks you loose from the downed electric wire of that crazy, volatile, emotional energy. It’s about being able to make a separation, stepping back into a more spacious inner place so that the whole pattern doesn’t just keep playing itself out mindlessly, stealing your vital life energy that can really be used for far better purposes. So where does Centering Prayer come into all this? Notice on the chart there’s a place 5A, called “place where the cycle can be broken.” It occurs during the nano-second between that first gathering sense of “frustration” and the moment you actually put the full weight of your being into your frustration, or become “identified,” in the classic spiritual language. This is a tiny “window of opportunity.” If one could be alert to that moment, it would be possible to avoid getting trapped. Rather than becoming tightly bound up in the feeling of “I,” the emotional energy would simply dissipate, and the person could avoid a useless trip over the waterfall. During the prayer period itself, Centering Prayer is constantly working that edge, that window of opportunity. If a thought comes up – say you’re sitting there in the prayer and remember that stormy clash you just had with your boss, and say this “attractive” thought starts to hook you and the emotions start building – you simply apply the guideline: “If a thought comes up, just let it go and return ever so gently to the Sacred Word.” Viewed from this perspective, the “letting go” practiced over and over in Centering Prayer is really a letting go of identification, a releasing of a “thought” before it becomes a “passion.” And with time and patience, you begin to become adept at this practice. The next step is simply to learn to do this drill when the boss is actually there right in your face....

#### Carrying Prayer into Daily Life

The Welcoming Prayer is Centering Prayer’s tool par excellence for making surrender an underlying attitude and practice for meeting daily life. It is a way to gain relief from the afflictive emotions of the false self system. Welcoming Prayer works in active life in the same way that Centering Prayer works in meditation. It works in that place, that slim window of opportunity before “thoughts” proceed to “passions.” It is one of the strongest practices I have every encountered for a rapid increase in both the quality and quantity of awakened consciousness. Welcoming Prayer operates on the principle of making a separation between the “I” totally lost in its reactions, desires, and aversions and the deeper “I.” But it does this in a very unique and interesting way. Rather than simply letting go of the thought, as is done in Centering Prayer, it actually “rides” the gathering storm of emotional and physical energy that has already started to build by the time a person becomes conscious of frustration. Essentially it redirects the pathway of this energy through the body so that it is liberated from the false self system and recaptured as vital energy for inner transformation. The ideal time to practice is as close to “ground zero” as possible – as soon as possible after you become aware of that initial sense of “frustration” arising. This is not always feasible, of course. Sometimes, such as in the middle of that clash with your boss, there is nothing to do except to wave goodbye to yourself as you go over the waterfall, then pick up the pieces as soon afterward as you can. But with practice and dedication, you’ll discover that the time required tends to diminish – and your conscious awareness increases – so the practice can be done almost simultaneously with the perceived upset itself.

#### **A Three-Step Process: 1. Focus and Sink In, 2. Welcome, 3. Let Go**

Focus and Sink in: To focus on the upset means to feel it as sensation in your body. If it is a physical pain, like a toothache or backache, you become very present to it, putting your full

attention inside it. Exactly the same is true for emotional upset. If you are angry, see if you can be present to how anger is manifesting in you. If fear is present, what is the sensation of fear? Don't try to change anything. Just stay present. Focusing does not mean psycho-analyzing yourself, trying to discover why you feel the way you do, or justifying your feelings. Where you are really upset, trying to psychoanalyze yourself is like pouring oil on fire anyway. Self-analysis lands you right back in your egoic self, while staying with sensation will align you with your inner observer. The importance of this step is really paramount; in fact, it holds the key to the entire practice. By becoming physically aware of this energy as sensation in your body, you have avoided one of the major potential pitfalls of working with the inner observer: dissociation. Dissociation – or repression – is one of the primary occupational hazards of people on a spiritual path. Also, if you have been brought up in a household where the expression of anger was unacceptable, you may be able to whisk it into your unconscious so quickly you don't even register that you are angry! From the point of view of authentic spiritual transformation, repression is not only useless but counterproductive, for that unrecognized anger simply goes right back down into your body, where it becomes just so much more sludge in the pipes blocking the free flow of your being. Spiritual practice in which separation is too mental – i.e., in which the inner observer is used primarily to dissociate from the unpleasant feelings rather than to experience and integrate them – will require some difficult unlearning somewhere along the line before inner integration is finally achieved.

Welcome Now comes the most inscrutable and counterintuitive instruction in the whole method. Sitting there, steeped in the whole rolling sensation of your upset, you begin to say, ever so gently, “Welcome, anger” (or whatever the emotion is), “Welcome pain, welcome fear... etc.” The goal is not to get rid of an emotion, the goal is to not let it chase you out of presence. By welcoming it, you create an atmosphere of inner hospitality. By embracing the thing you once defended yourself against or ran from, you are actually disarming it, removing its power to hurt you or chase you back into your smaller self. It is like a story where the hero or heroine turns to the demon and embraces it, at which point it vanishes, integrated back inside as the shadow he/she is finally willing to own. Whatever you are feeling, this emotional state can always be endured. And the act of welcoming anchors us firmly in the Now. This is the moment of unconditional presence, the moment where those two great streams, awareness and surrender, converge. The small self is surrendered into the inner observer, which allows you to remain connected with magnetic center and hence rightly aligned to receive the Divine assistance that is always flowing toward you. In this configuration, you are able to stay present in the Now regardless of its physical or psychological content.

A couple of important clarifications. First, what you are welcoming is the physical or psychological content of the moment only, not a general blanket condoning of a situation. Say if it is incest, you don't welcome the incest, but only the feelings the experience triggers for you: the fear or rage or shame on your plate right now. If it is cancer, you don't welcome the cancer, but, say, the fear you have of cancer. Surrender is an inner attitude, not an outer practice. From the point of view of inner work, the situation is very straightforward: Anything done in a state of interior bracing will throw you immediately into your small self, with its familiar repertoire of defense mechanisms. Surrender understood as an interior act will place you in alignment with magnetic center, the seat of your inner observer, through which Divine Being can flow to you. Once you are in right alignment, you can decide what you are going to do in the outer world. Whatever you do, you will now be doing from consciousness, not reactivity.

Let go Don't get to this step too quickly. The real work in the Welcoming Prayer is actually accomplished in the first two steps. Stay with them – rather like kneading a charley horse in your leg – going back and forth between “focusing” and “welcoming” until the knot begins to dissolve of its own accord. And yes, “letting go” is also just for now. This is not a final, forever renunciation of

your anger or fear; it's simply a way of gently waving farewell as the emotion starts to recede. If you simply can't in good conscience move to this step, don't fake it; the bulk of the work has really been accomplished. When you are ready to let go, there are two ways to go about it: a short way and a more complex litany. In the short way, you simply say something like "I let go of my anger." A more complex way can be said or done in this way:

"I let go my desire for security and survival. I let go my desire for esteem and affection. I let go my desire for power and control. I let go my desire to change the situation."

The first three refer to the false self programs. The last one, "I let go my desire to change the situation," in no uncertain terms removes this practice from the ballpark of "fix-it." It gets you right back to unconditional presence. This practice is all about correct inner alignment. Whether the pain goes on forever is not the point. The point is that throughout the entire "forever," an awakened and surrendered consciousness can remain fully present to God – "for the duration." Welcoming Prayer can be a very wild ride. The surge of emotional energy can be strong as it courses through you. You are not trying to "back down" your emotions or talk yourself out of them, just to stay present to them from that deeper witnessing place.

Welcoming Prayer is powerful in that it frees up energy. A lot of vital life energy is bound up in the false self programs. A false self system is a system working at a low level of being, which is why it remains so mechanical and viciously self-reinforcing. With its vital energy largely locked up in its defenses and neurotic programming, there is little left over to reach escape velocity into real awakened consciousness, which both requires and produces a higher level of spiritual vibrancy than we are used to. The influx of this new energy is immediately experienced as a deepening and vitalization of your innermost being. Sometimes the energy that is freed up is so dramatic, you can almost hear a "whoosh." Surrender and awareness come together with such a force you can actually feel it – it is the Christ light going off in your own being.