



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“The Seven Moments of Centering Prayer”

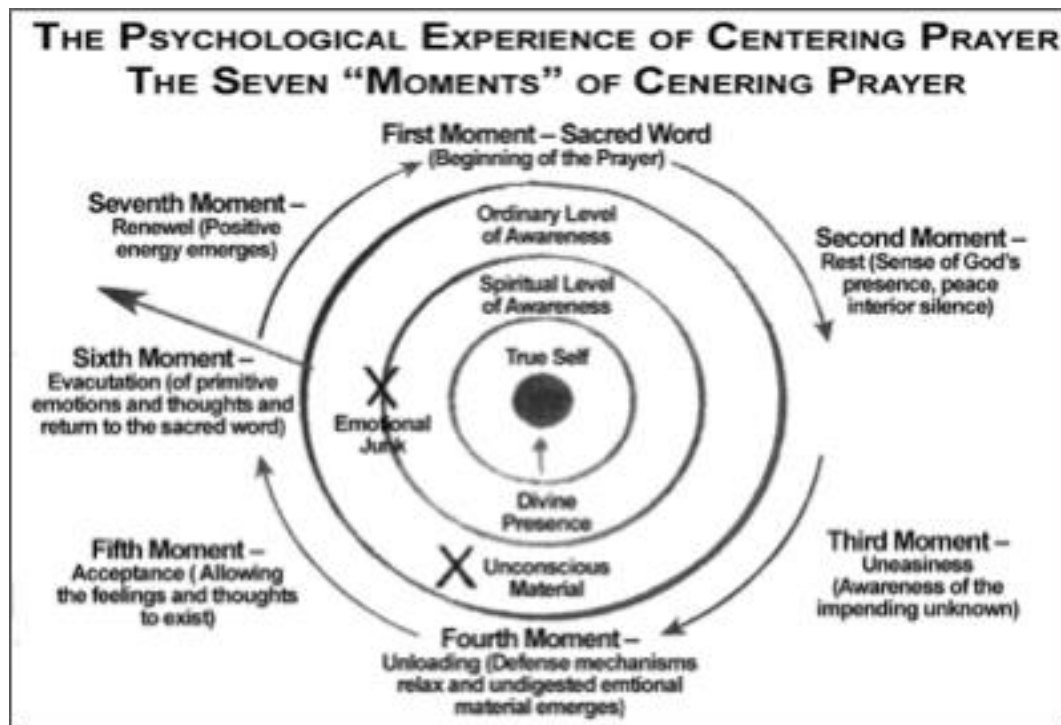
Excerpted from

*Centering Prayer: A Training Course for
Opening to the Presence of God*

(Sounds True)

Fr. Thomas Keating

Let us now turn to a few brief remarks about the experience of a psychological nature of the Centering Prayer practice in the light of what I have just tried to describe.



Suppose you are doing Centering Prayer as a practice and you have done it for two to three years. What is this going to feel like in your relationship to God, to yourself, to other people and to the cosmos? It is not going to remain the same.

FIRST MOMENT – The Sacred Word – Beginning the prayer

This diagram [on page 1] is of doing Centering Prayer for a number of years. But could also represent a single prayer period. Let's say we start at the First Moment when we introduce the Sacred Word or Sacred Breath or Sacred Glance, all of which are possibilities of expressing as a gesture, the intent to consent to God's presence and action. So, this is about consenting to God's action in a special way.

SECOND MOMENT – Rest - The sense of God's presence, peace, Interior silence

The first action that we notice as we have fewer and fewer thoughts flowing down the stream of consciousness, might be recognized as the Second Moment, or the first moment after we start, which is the experience of a certain peace, or rest or calmness, or the quieting down of emotional states we might have suffered from. It can be a sense of God's presence or a sense that we aren't interested in other thoughts and that we are able to sustain the general loving attentiveness towards the Divine Presence.

As a result of that rest, even though it might not be free of thoughts or some passing emotions that are attractive or repulsive as the case may be, it is not sheer emptiness and it is not the state of pure consciousness which hopefully may begin to emerge after more time. The rest is still greater than you get in sleep and as a result it begins to work on the unconscious and loosens up the soil around the emotional weeds of a lifetime that ordinary sleep has never been unable to touch or that a certain amount of therapy or exposure to self-help groups hasn't quite done.

This process is based on the Divine Therapy that the whole purpose of becoming aware of the dark side of one's personality, or the underbelly of one's spiritual journey is to have it healed and that there is somebody there who is going to do this – whether you perceive of it as energy or health or kundalini or something else. Of course, in the Christian perspective this is the personal love of the Divine person who identifies (make it personal) with my loneliness, fragility, separate self-sense, fear of death or all the other things that are characteristic of the false self; separate from this process of the Divine Therapy.

THIRD MOMENT – Uneasiness – Awareness of the Impending Unknown

What happens when one begins to feel a little uneasiness? You are about to find out something important; but you don't know quite what it is. The fact is that there is some material there stuck in you. We will put it in massage therapy terms. The masseur is applying pressure with his fingers and suddenly he hits a really sore place. You begin to see that there is something screwy there. What is the body housing there? The fascinating thing about the trauma or repressed material is that it goes into the unconscious just as it is, just as you experienced it at age one, two, three or four, hence with the fear of it happening again. That is what is coded in the nervous system and the musculature. There is a resistance to see it that is non-chronological. That is to say you've grown up now and it is 20 years later. The same concerns would not necessarily go off in the same situation; but you don't know that. So, all you feel is apprehension, what is this going to feel like, and maybe I would just a soon the masseur would take his elbow out of my stomach!

FOURTH MOMENT – Unloading – Defense mechanisms relax and undigested emotional material emerges

Then comes the fourth moment when one perceives what the trauma is, not necessarily the reason that's something else. During Centering Prayer, we don't recommend pursuing psychological insights of what caused the trouble – do that afterwards. What you do feel during the prayer is the emotion that you dreaded. That is, you feel the grief or the anger or the shame or the humiliation or the rejection or the oppression and this can be a very primitive emotion. It could also be the feeling of revenge or of unforgiveness or the whole raw emotional life. And remember that in early age emotions are extremely raw and direct and straightforward.

FIFTH MOMENT – Acceptance – Allowing the feelings and thoughts to exist

What you do with that feeling is so important. That is what decides whether you let go of the feeling and allow it to be evacuated by really feeling it and then letting it go. Allowing the body to feel it, or even the place in the body where you feel it.

This is not the same as returning to the Sacred Symbol. You can't normally even find the darn thing in this state of mind. It is like a buoy in a hurricane—it has disappeared. It is still there but is of no value to you. You are caught in a downpour and all you can do is let it rain. You might say that this is not your day. The attitude of acceptance of that feeling is crucial to the evacuation process. Otherwise we will re-repress some of it in order to escape or avoid the pain.

SIXTH MOMENT – Evacuation – Of the primitive emotions and thoughts and return to the Sacred Word

So here, this is acceptance, and then as soon as you do that the evacuation process begins. In the Ordinary Level of Awareness circle is presupposed the whole unconscious at all four levels: This is an ontological diagram of the stages in which one moves towards the True Self. The movement from Ordinary Awareness to Spiritual Awareness then to the True Self and finally the Divine Presence.

This diagram however is imposing on that ontological model a psychological model where in the unconscious, on every of the levels, except perhaps the Divine Presence, you have emotional junk. Or you have the supernatural organism (the true self) based in our core of goodness that is hidden in the unconscious and has never been allowed to be active! So, if we evacuate this one, let us say it is an experience of rejection that we repressed that was so painful and now it comes to mind in the form of distress, humiliation, shame or whatever and we feel it once again. Apparently, this is all that many emotions require, you have to feel them. If you don't they are repressed and warehoused in the body where they can collect in the musculature (our muscles) or the nervous system somewhere and require deep therapy or massage or the spiritual journey to begin to dissolve.

As a result of this rest, without having done anything except rest, the defence mechanisms of the psyche have gone down, the addictive process has been trumped, for the moment at least, and the body feels permission to get rid of stuff that should never have been there in the first place. This is an evacuation process, a psychological sweat you might say, or whatever other form of evacuation you prefer to think of.

Once that is gone, what happens is the spirit rushes into that empty place or the positive energies of the body and fills it up with the results of our capacity for human health. This capacity can't be underestimated. We don't even know the possible energies of the body. If we could plug into them;

we don't know the possible energies of corporate entities in the spiritual world that can join forces to help us.

So, as you negotiate this circle you get rid of chunks of emotional gunk that have been sitting there for years, naturally you feel like you are vomiting, but that is the best cure for something you've never digested, whether it is food or psychological experiences. At the same time this begins to be activated, (evacuation) you might even conceive of these positive energies of faith, hope and love and the gifts and fruits of the spirit replacing the negative energy.

When you come back to start the prayer again, having evacuated emotional junk that shouldn't have been there in the first place, you start the program closer to the center. And you go through the same process again or over many periods of prayer. So, this whole unconscious area is renewed and healed and recovered in its positive elements as it evacuates the junk of a lifetime.

One begins to move closer and closer to the center and the true self begins to manifest its symptoms and finally when you have done this long enough, you may come to the bottom of the junk and there is no more left. So, where are you? Divine Union I suppose. Where else would you be?