



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

"The Method of Centering Prayer, Guideline #3: Handling Thoughts" Excerpted from *The Spiritual Journey Prologue*

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The third guideline is: "When engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word."

This is just to say, or acknowledge the fact, that there are going to be various thoughts, feelings, sense perceptions, noise in the room, people coughing, memories, imaginations, visualizations, all sorts of dreaming. All of this psychological material, you might say, is going to be flowing down the stream of consciousness as you sit there. We say that it's inevitable, integral, and normal. This is a terribly important point to get through our heads if we've been trained in the doctrine of distractions – that distractions somehow are harmful, or interfere with your prayer.

It's important not to resist these thoughts. In other words, it's important to have a joyful attitude towards the thoughts. A friendly attitude towards the most dreadful thoughts. Not that you linger over them or act them out, but it's important that we expect them, and they're normal, and they're integral. We receive them all with a smile, sort of an inward smile, so to speak. A jolly attitude is recommended. "Here they go again!" That sort of thing. "Ha, ha, ha!"

The reason for that is that any emotional frustration, or annoyance, or distress, or grief, is not appropriate, because that is another kind of thought. Because it's emotionally charged, it's more of a hindrance to entering into interior silence – which is the proximate goal of this prayer – than any number of casual thoughts that go by. As soon as you're annoyed, you have a second thought, which is much more disturbing than the first one. There really is great wisdom in taking for granted there's going to be lots of thoughts, and endless thoughts, and that with practice you can disregard most of them.

The term "thoughts" is a technical term in our Centering Prayer practice, and it's an umbrella term – we could've used another term, but this one kind of got stuck – in which any perception whatsoever is referred to. That is, inner and outer sense sensations, memories, feelings, emotions, plans, commentaries. Any perception at all is a thought in the context of the Centering Prayer practice. That means that every time you are engaged with any perception whatsoever, according to this third guideline, you ever-so-gently return to

the sacred word. Not because the sacred word has some inherent, miraculous power of stopping the thoughts; it doesn't.

It's a mistake to use it as a bulldozer, or a baseball bat to knock the various thoughts out of the ballpark. This prayer is totally nonviolent. In fact, it's as effortless as possible, so that the very term "ever-so-gently" means you return to the sacred word with a minimum of activity. Not only that, but this return is the only activity you initiate in the Centering Prayer. In other words, you do nothing except to return to the sacred word when it's challenged by some attractive or repulsive thought, that begins to take you out of the disregard of thoughts.

The whole thrust of the prayer is to stop thinking. This doesn't mean you're not going to have thoughts, but notice this delicate distinction. We're not going to think about the thought. You can have all the thoughts in the world go by, and they won't interfere with the prayer. It's only when you start thinking about the thoughts, feeling, that you interrupt your original intention of just being totally open to God, and that calls for some response to reaffirm your original intention, and to get back to where you started.

Let's look at the third guideline, which is perhaps the most crucial one for most of us. When engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word. We said that thoughts are inevitable. We said they were integral. In other words, they're a part of the prayer. And as far as we can tell from our present level of experience, they're integral because your thoughts may be coming from the unconscious, and may be part of the process of healing that I'll come to later in my next lecture. The Spirit works as a kind of Divine Therapist. One of the ways that he heals the unconscious, is by allowing its feelings and its thoughts to surface, especially during prayer, and then later, sometimes outside the time of prayer.

It is precisely the programs in the unconscious – or what psychology calls the dynamics of the unconscious – that hinder the free flow of grace, and hence need to be addressed by the Spirit, brought to our attention, and we have to let go of them both in our prayer, and the consequences of them in daily life. You can see right away that Centering Prayer involves the whole of life. And the activity by which we bring its fruits into daily life is almost as important a factor in the project as the actual time that we faithfully spend each day in the prayer itself.

Thoughts are a normal part of Centering Prayer. As I already mentioned, a jolly attitude helps very much. It works somewhat like this. Suppose you were in deep conversation with someone you loved, and you're high up in an apartment house, and the windows are open, and the traffic is going by with noise you can't stop. All of a sudden, there's a crash in the street, and the decibels go up, and you naturally feel a curiosity to go see what happened. This is what happens when interesting thoughts or boats come down the stream of conscious. We want to look at them, or "What are we going to have for supper?" And so on.

Then, as your mind begins to look at this thing, or, let us say the young man begins to go to the window to see what the accident was, he suddenly remembers, "Oh, what am I doing? I'm in this deep, cheek-to-jowl conversation, heart-to-heart conversation. I'm not interested in this." It's not a time to go look and see what's happening outside, or to judge what we're really going to have for dinner. So, you want to reinforce, or reaffirm the original tête-à-tête that you were having.

What would you do? You would turn your eyes back towards the beloved, your friend, as a gesture of renewing the conversation from where it got somewhat disturbed. Or, you might say, "Excuse me," or you might say, "As I was saying..." Well, that's what the sacred word does for you. It's when you are lifted out of your basic intention, and start watching thoughts that you're attached to or have an aversion to, that you need to do something and to return to the sacred word.

If the thoughts are just going by like noise in the supermarket, and you're not paying any attention to it, you're just dimly aware that it's happening, then there isn't a necessity to go back to the sacred word. You're already at the place that the sacred word is meant to facilitate your reaching, which is the abiding, turning, and resting in the presence of God within you at the deepest level. Let me just sum up very briefly in this modest diagram here what I'm trying to say.

That suppose that this is our ordinary awareness, the stream of consciousness that we are experiencing during the time of prayer. And here are a few boats that are going by; boats representing thoughts, feelings, images, and so on. And there's usually a fleet of them. Sometimes the whole United States Navy seems to be going down with all the guns banging. Whatever your experience, you're having thoughts going by at this level. At a deeper level (let's call this the ordinary level of our awareness) ... and let's call this the spiritual level of our awareness – which you are really not aware of most of the time except at the peak experience, or when life, or tragedy, or something brings you to that place.

We're mostly unaware of what might be called "the river" itself, on which all our thoughts and faculties are resting. We're kind of absorbed, or dominated, in our ordinary psychological life, by the objects of events and people, and our emotional reactions to them. The purpose then, of the Centering Prayer, is to move from this [ordinary] level to this [spiritual] level. And indeed, not to stop there – because the human being has greater depths than that – but to move even deeper, to the level of the true Self, which is our participation in the divine life, and the Divine Presence itself as the Source of our being at every level.

It's accessing or awakening our awareness to this Presence that is the ultimate goal of contemplative prayer or Centering Prayer. To reach it, we have to pass through the spiritual level, and to awaken the true Self, and whatever of God's ultimate Divine Presence he may want to share with us, which is a whole new life, which is a transformed life. And which it seems to be is what the Gospel invites us to, especially in St. John [Gospel of John], where Jesus speaks of inviting us into the same union and unity that he experiences with the Father in the Holy Spirit. Hence, this is so important, again, from the perspective of prayer as a relationship.

There are lots of prayers at this [ordinary] level – our vocal prayers, our reflections, and our Divine Office, and the sacraments – but each of these things, especially the sacraments, has this mystical depth, or this mystagogic teaching, which helps us to understand the symbols of the Church from this [spiritual] level in which they are transformed, and their meaning becomes immensely more powerful, more attractive, and more personal, as well as, at the same time, bonding us with everyone else who is having a similar experience in grace. And that, we might say that the Centering Prayer is primarily involved in awakening this particular level, as a preparation for going deeper still, which is the work of the various stages of contemplative prayer and mystical life.