



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“What is Divine Therapy? Part 1”
Excerpted from
The Spiritual Journey Part 5,
Divine Love: The Heart of the Christian Spiritual Journey

Fr. Thomas Keating

Jesus has another strong saying that’s directed to that aspect of the false self that we were describing in the last conference; namely, the tendency to be identified with the particular group that we come from. All through the ages there’s been this stratification of society in which you had to fit into certain values that were pre- programmed. And anyone who didn’t do that would be ostracized or wouldn’t be very popular, to say the least. The cultural straight-jacket of over-identification is something that Jesus invites us to break with this saying:

Unless you hate your father and mother and relatives and property and your own self too, you cannot be my disciple. And so, this saying is another way of saying, “Repent.” That is, change the direction in which you are looking for happiness. Change your over-identification with your group so that you can be free to follow the values of the Gospel and your own conscience and not be unduly fearful of unsettling the group you’re in; or, as they say, rocking the boat.

Much of later life, after we’ve attained a certain settlement with our families and our profession or business or someone, leads to these challenges to let go – to let go of our over- identification with who we think we are. This is a problem – for parents, for ministers, for people with a special role, I suppose, for politicians or certainly in older times with kings and noble people who felt that they were ... they totally identified with their position whether social or otherwise.

Jesus, on the contrary, in the parables tends to undermine all the social structures of his time and to subvert the unquestioned values of the way things were. The movement of Jesus’ parables is to take down barriers of any kind and to enable people to experience their unity with the whole human family and not just with family, or ethnic group, or nation, or even religion.

As life goes on people come to what is called the mid-life crisis which is simply a time when all the great aspirations we had for success or fame or fortune; whatever the symbols in the culture appealed to us as the perfect gratification of our emotional programs for happiness began to get upset or shattered. Actually, right now here in New York with the tragedy of the twin towers, people are asking themselves: Why do I go to work? Why am I climbing the economic ladder? Why am I

going to all this trouble, if every place I move or every place I go is hazardous or dangerous? The security systems that we were familiar with, the fact that no foreign wars had touched our shores since the Civil War caused people to put a disproportionate sense of security in a number of things, especially in the economic situation or domination of the United States.

As the onset of the mid-life crisis comes, people's families are often upset. The children have moved out, often; and the couple are back to living with just each other. It's a time when a lot of people get divorced. It's a time where there are second careers. In other words, people have not found, in their programs for happiness expressed in the symbols of the culture or of their daily life, what they had hoped for.

It's a time for some psychotherapy, I guess. A lot of people do this. Or you take Prozac or whatever the more contemporary pill is that helps us to feel somewhat calm, when we're not calm ... and we'll never be calm until we face head on what the problem is. And no amount of chemicals is going to heal this problem. That's why psychotherapy is not just an issue of chemicals as it's tending to become in that profession, because there's no money for extended psychotherapy. The whole purpose of chemicals, as I was taught to understand it, is that it puts the patient in a certain level of calm that you can begin to deal with the real issues – which are basically emotional or spiritual.

If the mid-life crisis doesn't work, then nature has one more possibility of disengaging us from the roles that we played or thought we had to have in order to be happy. And this sometimes occurs or is expressed with old age; when you just can't do it anymore. You become feeble, you become a little senile. Everybody is trying to make jokes about your lack of memory. And so, your whole human level of expertise and of people relying on you, and then as it gets worse, then the children wind up taking care of you and sometimes to the point of taking care of you as if you were actually an infant. And then comes the crisis of the old age home, or the nursing home and senility. And this is one way in which a person loses their role because it is forcibly taken from them.

Well the question arises: Why not let it go a little sooner? So that you could enjoy the freedom of choosing the measure in which you're going to belong to certain groups and the freedom, if they have values that are offensive to your conscience; well you can move out peacefully and graciously.

Well if all of these don't work, there's always the possibility that the dying process may be helpful because when the brain dies, that's the end of the false self; that's the end of the individual self and all its support systems. We don't know much about the dying process – when it actually occurs or how long the soul lingers close to the body. There seems to be a whole variety of possibilities according to some researchers that have put some time on this. But whatever it is, it may be the moment in which for the first time in our lives we could make a free choice because we're not influenced by any of the baggage: the emotional programs for happiness or the over identification with our group or our role that we had carried with us all through life.

From this perspective sickness, tragedy, disaster, natural disasters, even man-made disasters are not unmitigated evils because for many people they may be the only way that their unquestioned interiorization of the values that they absorbed from four to eight are ever really reevaluated, questioned, and, hopefully, put in the wastebasket. Now this is not to say that they are not real values in one's role, but it's the over identification with them that makes it difficult or impossible to fulfill those roles correctly. So you might almost say that the only way to become a great parent is to be willing not to be one or to be willing to let the children go and become whoever they want to be

without being crushed or humiliated or feel rejected – all of these things – the emotions simply reflecting on over-identification process which, obviously, the children would be wise to disregard.

The strength and energy of Jesus' wisdom sayings (again, not to be taken literally) is simply: you've got to let go of the support systems of your false self because it's basically an illusion. It can't work. It's fouling up your relationship with God, with other people, with yourself.

And so along with the invitation to repent, change the direction in which you're looking for happiness, comes Jesus' invitation that we have been looking at quite closely: take the divine therapy. If you want to be free, if you want to pray, if you want to heal your relationship with God, enter your Inner Room. It's a kind of office. It's where the divine psychotherapy takes place. Close the door, so you don't run away too fast. Quiet your own interior mind, so that you can listen to what the Spirit is saying to your particular little cell, the little holon that you are within the greater holon of Christ's mystical body.

And the whole purpose of this therapy is to enable us to become who we really are. I don't know what else you think you can be. But we're scared of being who we really are. In any case, Jesus has a wisdom saying for this suggestion. And it's this one. He says: if you try to save your life, that is to say, your false self – it seems to be the meaning of life in this context – you will bring yourself to ruin. Okay, so the false self has no future. It is death that enables us to discover the true self and who we really are.

And then comes the second half of the wisdom saying, which is: I'll just repeat the first part to keep the context clear. If you try to save your life, you will bring yourself to ruin. One who brings himself to nothing will find out who he is. There's the promise. That means bring yourself to no-thing. That is no particular object because the true self is limitless in its spiritual capacity. And one of the things within us that is limitless is the desire for happiness. And so, to let oneself become no particular thing, no over-identification, no over identification with the body or feelings ... we have these things, or friends, or relatives, or property, our role, and our inmost self too. That is to say, our idealized image of who we think we are or should be or want to be. This, this, is what Jesus invites us to let go of. And the divine therapy is designed to enable us to do this in a humane way, over a period of time, with all kinds of other helps and with enormous intelligence to guide us through this process and with a love that is absolutely unconditional and determined to bring this about at all costs to himself.

And so, seen in this way, the redemption of Christ is not so much the atonement for sin, but the work of healing the wounds of human nature so that we might enter with him and be coheirs, to use Paul's phrase, of the divine nature; that is, to share inherently in the divine light, life and love, which is not only transforming of human nature but glorifying in the sense that it opens us totally to the presence of God, which is what glory really is.

The next question, now that we've laid this foundation, is to say: well, what is the cure? What is the therapy? What, in other words, goes on in the Inner Room, in the office of the Divine Therapist in which we faithfully, day by day, and twice daily expose ourselves to the Spirit, to the language of divine silence, and to the negativity or dark side of our personality or whatever in us is opposed to the likeness of God in which we were made.

There are two things that need to be distinguished or emphasized as part of this therapy or profound healing process. And the first one that takes place normally; and in most situations or cases is the affirmation of our basic goodness. I touched on this earlier in this section of our Spiritual Journey tapes. And it was to say that when we begin this therapy, the first thing that God does is to reassure us that it's okay, that it's good for us and that we ourselves are respected and honored by God as truly being created in God's image. The very idea that we're no good, that some people brought with them from early childhood, or unlovable, or unworthy is itself an insult to God because God does not make junk. We make junk.

But God not only supports and honors this inmost being, this image within us that reflects his goodness, but nothing can ever take it away. Hell itself, can never destroy this basic goodness. So any amount of failures on our part, any amount of subjugation to the human condition, any amount of personal disregard for our own conscience and the needs and rights of other people and whatever our complexity, or complicity, rather, in human affairs, or violence, or brutality, even torture – this never can take away our capacity to recover from the wounds of the human condition that hide from us the beauty, and the purity, and the essence of who we really are.

The affirmation of our basic goodness is sometimes expressed very simply by the peace that we notice during the time of prayer; that even when there are a lot of perceptions coming down the stream of consciousness, or a lot of thoughts, or unpleasant memories, or worries about the future. This reassurance about our basic goodness gives us the courage and the strength to drop those tempting thoughts, to drop, so to speak, our interest in their content. So that we don't think about those thoughts but simply allow them to pass through our consciousness during the time of prayer and on out the other side.

Here is where time is a great friend. If you just wait long enough, everything passes. And so, these thoughts that are so distressing, if we don't identify with those thoughts, then right away we begin to experience a certain peace. Because it's our complicity, our over-identification, our concern, our immersion in the ordinary psychological awareness of everyday life, and in our own interior dialogue with its endless commentaries. This is what is disturbing. And as that calms down, the number of thoughts, at least under normal conditions, begin to diminish and we begin to sense the presence of God within us, to feel this delicate attraction to go deeper manifested

by a devotion to the periods of Centering Prayer where we even feel drawn to it and in many cases as it develops people feel that they cannot not do it; that if they don't do it, they feel uneasy throughout the day.

This therapy is very real, very reassuring, and it manifests itself, basically, in the feeling that everything is okay, even though I feel awful and completely unregenerate and still under the influence of all the energy centers and my over identifications and I know there are some things that I should change in my life, but I'm not quite ready to. And there are a lot of other things that I'm beginning to see that should be changed that I wasn't ever aware of until this process began.

And so, basically, it's entering the private room and that's a clear expression of goodwill which is all that God wants. Come in and be healed is the invitation. And the first experience is usually, normally, a period, fairly extended, in which we are finding a new world and it reflects and is manifested in daily life by a greater peace, a greater calm, sometimes, joy, and a capacity to be more concerned for others, and not just mentally concerned but practically concerned for others.

All our relationships are healed, are beginning at least to be healed through the process of unwinding our emotional programs for happiness and of dis-identifying with our over identifications with our group. But this includes also our over identification with all the other aspects of our body, and our nature, that we tend to get unduly concerned about.

Suppose now that we're doing this prayer on a regular basis. Centering Prayer, as you know, is a discipline leading to contemplative prayer. That is to say, it's a discipline to foster the relationship that gradually becomes contemplative prayer in which the Spirit of God more and more takes over our prayer and through the contemplative gifts of the Holy Spirit: knowledge, understanding, and wisdom begin to modify our view of reality by the divine view, to modify our perception of what is of value and our belief systems – and I refer here not so much to religious belief systems but to the belief systems that were part of the socialization period when we absorbed the values of our particular group, which could have been as trivial as having your hair parted on the right instead of the left.

Usually a human being acts out of a belief system. And so, if you think that you always have to please everybody. If you think or have been taught that you always have to have straight A's. If you're a high achiever because of the encouragement of parents or the competition of peers, and those things, then that's why you function or act; or if you have identification with status. Or if you're ambitious. All of these things are belief systems that are unquestioned, that probably we picked up in that socialization period from four to eight. And they are a straight-jacket. And they are hindering our inner freedom of choosing what we really think or believe or know, as the case may be, is right or is congenial to our conscience and to our faith.

This process, then, can deepen. And the Centering Prayer method normally consists in introducing a sacred word, or it can also be the sacred glance or gaze towards God, not as an image or as a particular concept but simply as a mysterious presence that we know is there and that we love. It can also at times take the form of noticing our breath as the pouring into our spirits of the Holy Spirit. Spirit means breath and exhaling the divine love into the atmosphere for the healing of all the social ills of humanity. But it's not a reflective act. It's simply a symbol, an expression, a gesture of maintaining our intent to consent to God's presence within. Or, more exactly, to consent to God's intentionality which is to heal us of all our wounds and to transform us in the process of Divine Union.

As we practice this prayer on a daily basis, twice daily, the capacity to let go of interesting or attractive thoughts or perceptions or feelings or, for that matter, thoughts that inspire an aversion ... because both of them are emotional interferences with the movement towards interior silence. As we let these go; the habit of letting go becomes more prompt. And as this becomes habitual, there are moments in which we are aware that we're not interested in the thoughts, even the most interesting, or those that are of immediate concern, or those that we really have to decide in the next few days, or those that we have to deal with because of their importance. They all maintain their importance, but the process of the therapy that we're taking is more important and we know that through those moments of silence, our mind will be clearer to make the right choices and that the Spirit will be with us through the Gift of Counsel to help us to make at least reasonably correct decisions, in that capacity. To make ever better decisions is related to our growth in the prayer.

That capacity of being aware that one is not interested in the thoughts is not a judgment; it's not an evaluation; it's not an act of reasoning and still less is it a choice. It just happens spontaneously and

intuitively at times, one is aware that the thoughts are going by: perceptions, feelings, memories, plans, all that we call thoughts in the Centering Prayer practice. And yet we feel some deep level ... it's mysterious to us; we can't name it ... a certain freedom, an at ease-ness that they're not interfering with the movement of our communion. So Centering Prayer, then, is experienced as a movement from conversation to communion, as a movement from activity to receptivity. And it's this receptivity that enables contemplative prayer to take root and to take over the whole process and the method. And then the Spirit of God becomes the only method; that is to say, guides us during the time of prayer from start to finish.

This experience of freedom from thoughts during the time of prayer is the beginning, in my view, of contemplative prayer. It's still tenuous. So, there's an alternation of our own activity: returning to the sacred symbol, usually the sacred word, and then being silent; and then experiencing maybe not silence but thoughts, and yet being still free from following them or being interested in them. This is the beginning of the healing process and a taste of what true happiness really is and it's this taste that is to be encouraged to grow and begin to take over all our attitudes and to manifest in all our activity and faculties and bodies, souls, relationships, roles, and everything else, to manifest God's presence.