



# THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

## "Prayer as Relationship"

Excerpted from

*Centering Prayer: A Training Course for  
Opening to the Presence of God*  
(Sounds True)

Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler

The psalmist gives us a clue as to how to be in relationship with God. We are called to "Be still and know that I am God." Being still is the main clue – it's a little secret – of how to be in relationship with God. Prayer is a relationship with God. We may think of prayer as words, as thoughts or feelings expressed in words, but prayer is more than that. That is only one expression. Contemplative prayer is the deepening of our openness to God. It is a means of opening to God, the Ultimate Mystery beyond words, beyond thoughts, beyond our feelings.

St. Gregory the Great in the sixth century called contemplative prayer "the deep knowledge of God impregnated with love." I love that thought. It's so dear and so sweet. The deep knowledge of God. It is a deep knowing, deeper than knowing with our heads, but knowing with our whole being. In this "being still" we get to know God. We get to know who God is in relationship to us. I think our lived experience, our often experience, is doing a lot, moving around, thinking, talking, hoping, dreaming, but always wrapped up in ourselves and our own thoughts. This little secret that the psalmist called us to so long ago, was the secret of how to be in this deeper relationship – be still. That's what contemplative prayer is. It is a pure gift from God given to us. And I believe it was given to us at birth or even before. We come into existence with this deep knowing, this impregnation of God's love for us. And we long for it and we don't know how to get it! Centering Prayer is one means, one way, a practice that we can enter into and begin to taste, maybe ever-so-slightly what being still is.

Centering Prayer was inspired by the wisdom saying of Jesus in Matthew 6:6: "When you pray go into your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret will reward you." I think the reward is the relationship. It is being in that relationship and being willing to be in a relationship with God.

When we think of prayer we don't always think of it as being a relationship. But it has multiple levels. When we hear the words: "Let us pray," we are being called into that relationship. "Let *us* pray. Us. It is not, let *me* pray or let *you* pray. It is "Let *us* pray." It is a togetherness. The two of us – let's pray.

The levels of relationship move from acquaintanceship to intimacy. I call on your own experience. Just for a moment, maybe you want to close your eyes, or if you don't want to particularly close your eyes, just think about a relationship that you have – one of intimacy. Just think about that. Did it happen overnight? I don't think so. You may want to recall the very first moment you ever laid eyes on the beloved one. What was that like? That's where it all began. Somehow you were called into this relationship and you got acquainted. You moved with consent and commitment to maybe a little bit deeper relationship. One of maybe of friendliness where you got to know the person a little bit more and you shared with them some parts and some things about yourself. But maybe not too deep within. You were still testing the relationship.

Then, as you became more involved, or let's say in love or moving in love, you moved into a deeper friendship. This person became very important to you. You would miss them if they weren't here. You always had thoughts about them, wondered where they are and what they were doing. You began to think of them on a fairly regular basis. Not always with your head, but your heart was opened.

Each movement of relationship, though, I would think acquaintanceship pretty much starts on the level of the intellect where you start to figure out this person; you get the facts and figures down. Gathering the data ... we are very good at that. We like to gather the data so we know this and that. In times, we like to know what people do, where they were born, and those kinds of things. Then, with a little bit more interest you decide to move into a deeper relationship. It is a decision. A decision of commitment and consent. Each level of relationship moves with your commitment and your consent to take the next step. As we go from acquaintanceship to friendliness and then movement into friendship or that trusting relationship which is a little deeper and a little bit more of a commitment, as we move into the intimacy, a very deep commitment, one of oneness or being, being together, we think again of being still.

We may take a look at prayer and how prayer develops over time from the first moments of praying, at that level of acquaintanceship when you first get to know there is God, or at least, start to know about God. I always think of my little grandson, Anthony. When we pray before meals, he says, "I will do the prayer." And we all wait for him to do the prayer. What does he say? "Pray, pray, pray." That is his prayer because that is his level of acquaintanceship with God. He's not sure what God is. He doesn't know much about this God we are saying prayers to. So, he says, "Pray, pray, pray."

I often think of it in terms of my own childhood. I was so enthralled with the baby Jesus. It is so easy to be interested in the baby Jesus because we all have experiences with babies and we know what that is like. A baby is so accessible; we can cherish that and understand that in our baby minds in our beginning understanding of vocal prayers and getting to know who God is. As we move and begin to think about it, we begin to read Scripture and begin to know more about prayer, we reflect on it and we make a commitment to grow in this relationship with God. Maybe we have some moments of responsiveness.

Centering Prayer helps us to be still. It is a discipline. It is a way or means of taking ourselves twice a day to sitting and being still. The focus of Centering Prayer is the relationship. So, it is a twofold experience. It is both a discipline to take us into that time of stillness and that time of being present and a way of deepening our relationship in the inner room, in the inner room that Matthew 6:6 talks about.

So, in that inner room what are we doing? We're being still and we're getting to know God. And we are getting to know ourselves in relationship with God as well. We learn how to be with God. We learn how to be with ourselves. As one of the benefits of it, in a sense, we learn how to be with one another. We learn how to be with one another in love as well. There is a lot of training that goes on in this inner room. And it all happens in the silence of transmission. The heart-to-heart experience of being one. The willingness to allow ourselves to open. To open and say Yes from the very moment we enter. An opening, opening, opening.

Essentially contemplative prayer is a series of openings. It is a continuous movement of openness. First, of opening our minds, for our willingness to know and to relate to God. Secondly, to move into our heart and allow our heart to open. As our heart begins to open and expands, we settle in and allow ourselves to see ourselves, to see ourselves as God sees us and to be willing to be present. It is a continuous movement of openness. That is what contemplative prayer is.

It is certainly a worthwhile journey to learn a practice, to experience it and to take the time, to set some time aside each day to develop this relationship with God. We don't want to take it lightly. We may want to take it more seriously and really deepen it. Centering Prayer has that experience attached right to it. You just say Yes twice a day. Centering Prayer can be called the Prayer of Consent, because it is a means of saying Yes to God and allowing God to have God's way with us. It takes time, and over time we become more willing to allow this relationship to deepen and develop. It teaches us so much about relationship.

It is my conviction that that is what we are here for. Human beings, I believe – I don't know why I believe this but I guess for various reasons – I think our lesson here is to learn how to be in relationship. I think this is one way to do it because it teaches us so much in the silence. And, we get out of the way of ourselves and we allow God to train us in what true relationship is.

It is a journey. It's a journey from the head to the heart ... to the being ... to the very stillness of our being ... to the interior place where God dwells within us.