



Centering Prayer in Uncentered Times

Excerpted from an interview with Thomas Keating and Jonathon F.P. Rose of The Garrison Institute, October 2008

JR: Tell us about Centering Prayer, and particularly the role of Centering Prayer in an uncentered time.

TK: [laughs] Well, obviously the role of Centering Prayer in an unsettled time is to center. It's a term that comes from St. John of the Cross in *The Living Flame of Love*, one of his most mature writings, and it's not a bad term for what we're trying to do, because as he says, the center of the soul is God and so as we leave behind the perplexities and the suffering and the turmoil at least as an obsession or over-emphasis on it, we turn towards our inmost center, and we move from ordinary psychological awareness to the spiritual level of our being, a level of intuition and our capacity for God. St. Thomas says that the soul has a certain capacity for God. To open to this capacity, we need to turn our attention from our preoccupations temporarily to get the perspective on reality which has God as its center.

Some theologians have said God is reality, not just our reality but everything that in a sense is God, in a sense of coming from the Ultimate Reality as the source, whether you consider this personal or impersonal God. The Ultimate Reality is probably both — it adjusts to each thing that exists according to its nature. As we move towards the inner self, one approaches what some folks call the true self; in the Judeo-Christian tradition it would be called the image of God or the image and likeness of God. The likeness is what we don't have yet or which we lost depending on what your religious understanding or perhaps your scientific preference might be, because in the perspective of evolution, especially spiritual evolution, we're returning to our source or as the Buddhists call it — and this is just a private interpretation, I hope you'll forgive me — emptiness is form and form is emptiness. ...

So, Centering Prayer is a movement towards the center, our own center, which is also the center of everything else that exists which is the Ultimate Reality or God in the label given by the Judeo-Christian traditions, but which could be called anything. ... It's the faith in God as the center of our being that is not only supporting as an existence but welcoming us into the divine hospitality, the only host that can give not just gifts but Itself to us. ☸

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Is Snowmass Still Our Spiritual Home?

We maintain a spiritual relationship with St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, CO.

Saint Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado is our spiritual home and a place of retreat and renewal where new insights for our spiritual journey may be revealed.

Guidelines for Contemplative Outreach Service with Commentary #10



Image credit: Ron Barnett

With the explosion of Centering Prayer groups online and the expanding reach of our community worldwide, I must admit I started to wonder about the relevance of this guideline for those in Contemplative Outreach (CO) who have never, and most likely never will—have the opportunity to experience the community at Snowmass firsthand. While St. Benedict's will continue to hold value for us because of the place it had in the formation and teaching of our dear Thomas Keating and William Meninger, I wondered how an ongoing relationship with the monastery could be maintained without them and with the ongoing pandemic-related travel restrictions. Would this guideline about St. Benedict's being our 'spiritual home' continue to be relevant for CO in the years to come? And how can it be relevant now for those who have never had the opportunity to experience Snowmass as a 'place of retreat and renewal where new insights for our journey may be revealed'?

These were some of the questions in my mind as I arrived for a 10-day post-intensive retreat at Snowmass in September of this year—the first retreat I had experienced in what was supposed to be my 'spiritual home'. Thankfully, the complexities of travel even across the Canadian border during the Covid pandemic did not prevent me from joining nine other retreatants—all from the U.S.—who arrived at St. Benedict's on the beautiful summer-warm afternoon of September 4, 2021. For me, that day began an adventure in discovering the meaning of Snowmass as 'home,' an adventure which I think can be replicated the world over, regardless of where one lives and attempts to embody the values of contemplative prayer. As I wandered her hills and sat through hours

of prayer in the retreat house and with the monks during vespers and morning mass, I learned that indeed, Snowmass still has much to teach us about the value of our contemplative tradition. With gratitude, I share a few of them with you here.

First, my time at Snowmass reminded me of the importance of extended prayer; an hour in the morning; 1.5 hours before lunch and another hour late afternoon. But at St. Benedict's there were added opportunities for contemplative prayer during lauds and mass in the morning and vespers in the evening. Added to this was the beautiful sound of the bell calling the monks to prayer throughout the day—similar to the gong sounding in the deep silence of our prayer room at the retreat centre. Praying in such close proximity to the monks reminded me of the power of the tradition from which Contemplative Outreach was born, as well as the power of prayer in so many other world religions. Could the Benedictine call to prayer five times a day, for example, be compared to the Muslim practice of kneeling towards Mecca in a similar rhythm of pre-dawn vigil through evening watch? And if so, how can this type of deep commitment to prayer inform the practice of those of us who were not raised with such rituals? Fr. William Meninger says this about the Benedictine commitment to prayer in his beautiful book called *Come to the Mountain*:

Life at St. Benedict's is structured around prayer. We first establish the time for prayer; then we plan the rest of the day's activities. Prayer is the anchor.

Seeing this principle lived out firsthand at St. Benedict's reminded



me of Fr. Thomas's instruction to set aside a minimum of 20 minutes twice a day for our Centering Prayer practice. In a subtle and beautiful way he handed on to us an age-old monastic tradition which can be lived out anywhere we are. The sacredness of Snowmass valley is apprehended by the sacredness within, cultivated by a rhythm of prayer, which then CAN be experienced on the busy streets of Hong Kong, or the rural quiet of Ireland, or even behind prison walls— wherever it is we decide to set aside a regular time for Centering Prayer and other forms of contemplative practice.

The second thing I was reminded of by being on retreat at Snowmass was the importance of human relationships and their interplay in small communities, something which I think is being challenged in a real way through our current need to meet on Zoom and our desire (however well-intentioned!) to share Centering Prayer and its contemplative vision as widely as possible. (Guideline

for Service #1). Being at an in-person retreat reminded me of what it means to actually see, hear and smell the presence of others through the vicissitudes of daily life (including our various abilities to show up for meals on time and sign up for daily chores!). This was an important reality check for me on how I view the relationships I have been building through Zoom over these many months. And living even for a short time close to the monks at Snowmass reminded me that Centering Prayer is grounded in a tradition that involves a deep commitment to living in community, regardless of how small or humble it may appear. Encounters with the outside world are clearly limited for the monks, but their commitment to one another is unmistakable, with the unique gifts of each shining through in the smallest of ways. As Fr. Meninger says:

Monastic life is no quick fix. It has a slower pace than life in the world, and it is directed toward a lifelong



commitment. Thus the discernment process is cautious, providing the seeker with time to dip a toe in the water before plunging in (Come to The Mountain).

So I wonder, what can we learn from the Benedictine example of small, holistic communities that are developed slowly over time? Is the creation of such communities still possible in this age of Zoom gatherings and pandemic-related restrictions?

My time at Snowmass also reminded me of the role that both place and geography can play in contemplative practice. In choosing *Come to the Mountain* as the title of his book, Fr. Meninger reminds us that St. Benedict's monastery is about much more than the people and human-built structures that exist there, however precious these may be. Indeed, his chapter entitled *Wisdom*, describes in detail how the 'more than human beings' who roam the fields and hillsides of Snowmass are essential teachers in the lives of the monks who live there. In his chapter on *Lectio Divina* —also a cornerstone of Benedictine life – Meninger explains: *Anything approached with faith can be a source of Lectio Divina. This can include our experiences of nature, as both beautiful and awesomely terrifying.* This embodied experience of God through nature was my own experience at Snowmass as well. As with other intensive retreats, I found time outdoors essential for balancing the long prayer periods and bountiful meals that comprised the daily schedule. But the geography and climate of this sacred valley had unique lessons to teach. First, I quickly learned the importance of slowing down and letting go of how far I could walk in the 30-degree Celsius heat at an elevation of 8,000+ feet. And the view down the valley from each step up the path gradually opened me to the spaciousness of this place. By the fourth day, the vastness of the landscape seemed to pervade my prayer time in the retreat house so that our circle became the rim of God's singing bowl itself! The time I spent sitting with the hills outside also gave me a new understanding of the power and untiring strength that holds us when we pray; by the end of the retreat I knew that I was not just sitting on a chair in the meditation room, but on the very rocks and landscape that held that chair. At last, I had indeed 'come to the mountain.'

Clearly, my time at Snowmass was helpful for my own spiritual journey. But did it answer the question of how St. Benedict's can continue to be a spiritual home for those who may never have such an opportunity? The answer for me seems to be a resounding yes! For what I learned is that Snowmass will continue to live in the hearts and minds of those everywhere who:

- Set aside time daily to practice Centering Prayer
- Value the long, slow process of formation in small communities
- Remember the earth and all her beings as part of this community

In this time of change and upheaval, let us remember our roots together, draw on their strength, and continue to celebrate the beauty of our spiritual heritage. ☸

Steps in Search of Meaning

JILL BENET

“God will bring people and events into our lives and whatever we may think about them, they are for the evolution of God’s life in us.” Thomas Keating, *A Rising Tide of Silence* film



My introduction to Thomas Keating was in the nineties when a copy of *Open Mind Open Heart* was thrust into my hand. I remember distinctly saying to my husband, “You know, there is something in this book!” Centering Prayer became the next step in my search for meaning after over twenty years of studying and practising different spiritual and philosophical Traditions.

Centering Prayer and its psychological background widened my perception and understanding of the Christian faith. There was something about this receptive practise called Centering Prayer that was drawing me. I recall a visit to Raimon Panikkar when reflecting on different traditions. He said that he left Europe for India as a Christian, discovered he was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be a Christian. And as Thomas Keating said, Christ is bigger than Christianity.

I engaged enthusiastically with Thomas Keating's teaching, Centering Prayer, *Lectio Divina*, the Welcoming Prayer Practice and volunteered for everything! I trained in the UK and US, attended retreats led by Fr Thomas and

annual conferences. I taught others, co-founded Contemplative Outreach London. I resonated with the nuances and background that Cynthia Bourgeault brought to Centering Prayer and supported her visits to the UK.

In 2018, I was invited to join a newly formed global team representing English-speaking countries. As we continued to meet, the concept “global” acquired a new significance for me. I experienced a fluidity; there was no longer a fixed centre. The centre is wherever the practice takes place. We are members of one body. The body of Christ.

Paradoxically, the pandemic, a global phenomenon with no fixed centre, has had the effect of bringing into the same online space people from many countries, transcending barriers and lineages of Centering Prayer. The practise of Centering Prayer has responded to this global longing for unity and love. United in one body of prayer.

I continued to be inspired by how Fr Thomas never ceased to share his explorations, gather around him teachers of other traditions, and follow scientific and psychological developments to enrich our understanding and living

experience of the Divine life. His later recordings show his developing insights about his earlier teaching.

There is a sense that the Christian contemplative life is growing in recognition among spiritual seekers and Christians alike. Thomas Keating's final gift, the eight poems, *A Secret Embrace*, illuminated by Cynthia Bourgeault's profound reflections, offer us further insights into Unity.

In my never-ceasing explorations, I was invited eight years ago to explore the process of Focusing as a contemplative practice. Since then, the process, which I now teach, has become an embodied way of life, deepening Presence. It develops the capacity to turn toward our present moment response to ourselves and others with interest, non-judgement, empathy, and radical acceptance.

I could fill this page with the names of those I have met on this journey that I would love to thank and share the joy. I know this one thing; Centering Prayer deepens faith and whilst true faith is imperceptible, at times I sense a sweet embrace of confidence.

May you have a blessed Advent ☸

Jill Benet has been a part of Contemplative Outreach for over 20 years, serving as a prayer group facilitator, Introductory Workshop presenter and trainer, and retreat leader. She was co-founder of Contemplative Outreach London and the Silence in the City series of talks on the Christian contemplative life. Her "day jobs" included teaching art and creating crystal chandeliers. Jill is currently completing certification as a teacher and guide as an Inner Relationship Focusing Professional. She lives between London and Barcelona with her husband and spiritual companion Antonio Benet.

The Day I Got Sober

The following was written by a member of 12 Step Outreach and uses Alcoholics Anonymous Tradition 11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.



The day I got sober I was trying to get professional help to stop drinking. I had tried everything else and now I had the gift of desperation. I paused with my hand on the door and sent a silent message to a God I did not know or trust, saying “Whatever happens, I’ll accept it.” What I got was the gift of sobriety and a tentative step toward trust in a loving God.

My father had died months earlier and alcohol killed him. It was an avoidable death. He came in from the golf course and suffered cardiac arrest. He was revived with CPR in the clubhouse but when the ambulance got there he refused to go to the hospital. Two days later he was dead.

His death was a tragedy for me. He might have loved me but he never approved of me. Our relationship was one of unresolved conflict. Besides the loss, his death cut into my denial and I had to face the fact that I was headed in the same direction as my father. Alcohol had control of my life and I didn’t know what to do about it. In my insanity I decided that I needed to keep drinking until I got so bad that my family would put me in treatment.

Full of pain and trying unsuccessfully to outwalk the demons, I started stopping in an empty church. Sitting in the dark, feeling hopeless, I wanted to believe in something. Yet I didn’t think I could trust the God who I had been given to me in childhood until I “got good”. In that religion of my early years there had been little “good news” so I left it behind.

Today I believe that the many times I spent in that dark church before I got sober was similar to the practice of Centering Prayer. The word “please” became my sacred word and a need for help was my intention. All of my best efforts to stop drinking had failed. The only thing I brought with me was desire and despair and God did the rest. The pain was the catalyst needed to help me to surrender to God’s presence and action within.

After I got sober, I have asked for help every day to stay sober and I say a prayer of thanks at night. That and AA have helped me to stay sober for 38 years and to believe in a God of my understanding who is loving and

trustworthy. I still ask for help daily as well as attending 12-Step meetings. I am confident that God keeps me sober but meetings remind me that I have an alcoholic mind and that I am always one drink away from active alcoholism unless I ask God for help.

I was sober about 10 years when I experienced something that seemed like another spiritual awakening. A friend asked me to visit someone that we knew from AA meetings who had gotten drunk. Marge was a faithful church member but she had never been able to stay sober for long. I was baffled and didn't know what to tell her. "I know you go to church", my friend said to her, "but it's not about just showing up at church, it's about relationship, about having a close and loving relationship with a God of your understanding."

The idea of relationship was a revelation to me, a new concept. I realized I am not very good at relationships and despite asking for help, I did not have much of a relationship with God though I was dependent on this God of my understanding. I never had anything to talk to God about. I figured God knew everything and anything I said would be redundant.

I wanted that relationship but didn't know how to get it.

Several years later a 12-Step friend called to tell me about her experience on a retreat learning the practice of Centering Prayer. She shared her experience and told me that I was going to love the practice. I felt a strong desire to learn the practice and realized it was the third time I had heard about it. In the recovery community, sometimes people talk about the rule of three. If one person tells you that you are growing a tail, you can ignore it. If another person tells you, consider it. If a third person tells you, you need to check it out. It took a while to learn and to establish my practice but Centering Prayer was what I needed to move beyond the friendship level in my relationship with God.

Today, after years of Centering Prayer, it makes sense to me. If we have someone we really care about and we want to improve that relationship, how could you do it? If you spent 20-30 minutes with them, twice a day, every day with no agenda, just sat with them and made yourself available to the relationship, would it improve that relationship?

It has for me. And if I miss once in a while, the God of my childhood

does not appear saying, "That's it, we're through." The God of my understanding today says, "I love you but I know you're busy. Come back when you can because I will be here and I love being with you."

Thomas Keating, among others, taught me about a loving God. Getting caught with a hand in the cookie jar, he suggested that God might offer us another cookie.

Thomas Keating taught me that God is in the silence. And it is there that I seek God and there that I surrender to God's presence and action within.

He also said, in the book *Divine Therapy and Addiction*, when we sit in silence, we allow God to introduce himself or herself as he or she is and not as other people have defined him or her.

I cannot define God. I have more confidence and trust in the God of my understanding today but fewer words that might describe God.

William Meninger's words about God express my thinking better: God who the mind cannot grasp, the heart will know. The heart will know by not knowing. We will know by loving.

I am grateful to have many loving relationships in my life today. ☩



Embodied Practices: Incarnational Prayer

PULELEHUA RUTHMARIE QUIRK



*Christ Has No Body Now But Yours
No Hands, No Feet On Earth But Yours
Yours Are The Eyes that Look
Compassion On the World
Yours Are The Feet that Walk To Do Good
Yours Are The Hands that Bless All The World*
St. Teresa of Ávila (attributed)



I was 25 the first time I heard these words. They were being sung and embodied at a Dances of Universal Peace (dancesofuniversalpeace.org) gathering. This interfaith group gave me my first glimmer of knowing that I am filled with the Divine Indwelling and I have the opportunity to consent to God's presence and action in my life in the activities of daily living.

*In what ways is your everyday life
an embodiment of your faith?*

In my youth, I considered the body a necessary evil; spirituality was about my soul, my spirit, my mind. The body was a source of temptation and distractions. Christ became human, I am created in the image of God—I “knew” these things but I did not understand them viscerally *You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within you—the Spirit you have received from God. You are not your own.* (1 Corinthians 6:19)

In my twenties, I began to learn to move and embrace the body in sacred ways—liturgical dance, sacred dance festivals (sacreddanceguild.org), walking meditations, contemplation in stillness following the breath. I started to experience the Holy Spirit and grace of God in the synovial fluids that flow throughout the body.

I began to see that everything I do is a prayer. Everything I do reflects my relationship with God, and prayer is about deepening my relationship with God. I sometimes forget these truths, but then I am lovingly and sometimes painfully reminded by the wonders of the mind, body, social, spiritual connections.

*In what ways is being in the body a way to connect
and deepen your relationship with God?*

I was introduced to the Centering Prayer practice in my forties. I love the fact that the third Centering Prayer guideline says **“When engaged with your thoughts ... Thoughts include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections.”** The acknowledgment that as a person I would have this happen affirmed my humanness in the contemplation practice.

There is a story that in one of the very earliest training workshops led by Keating himself, a nun tried out her first twenty-minute taste of Centering Prayer and then lamented, “Oh, Father Thomas, I’m such a failure at this prayer. In twenty minutes, I’ve had ten thousand thoughts!”

“How lovely,” responded Keating, without missing a beat. “Ten thousand opportunities to return to God.”

This practice of returning ever-so-gently to the sacred word develops automaticity and builds helpful neurological pathways in our brain.

*In what ways do you find that your faith practices
are changing your brain?*

In my fifties the Welcoming Prayer came to become part of my life—the prayer in my ordinary everyday times. Learning about the creation of this practice affirmed my knowing that everything I do is a prayer. I don't know why it works; it is illogical and irrational, but with practice it works!

Until I was almost 60 years old, my relationship with Divine was one where I could feel Divine presence like a lover holding me. God: Love. Lover

and Beloved. Separate but lovingly with me.

Then I Entered a Dark Night of My Soul.

My son Shane died unexpectedly at the age of 34. In one of our last conversations, he said, “Mom, you have the gift of dance and moving prayer. You must share this! Now is your time!”

My son’s death broke me wide open. I lost my feeling of being connected to God. I saw the world through the confusion of grief and disconnected pieces.

I reached out to family and friends who spent time with me as I cried and screamed and cried some more. Having someone *being with me* was a comfort that kept me in the world.

During the next several months I tried all kinds of things, looking for anything that could help me. Here are two practices that really stood out and have become my lifeline.

1. A friend from Contemplative Outreach Hawai’i agreed to do The Welcoming Prayer: Consent on the Go, a 40-Day Praxis with me. We talked on the phone. Sent daily emails. And dove deeply into this practice. It took us maybe 60 days to complete; some days took two or three days. This deepened my Welcoming Prayer practice in ways that I don’t cognitively understand but are part of me now

2. A friend introduced me to Braindance. This practice has enabled me to embody my grief and ground me, leaving room for the Divine Indwelling to be part of my body and life.

BrainDance movements mimic the movement patterns developed in the first year of life. They feed the brain and re-patterns neurological systems, like rebooting a computer. It creates deeper understanding of our bodies, and it aids in healing our mind, body, emotional and spiritual selves.

In the human condition model, Fr. Keating looks at our earliest selves. The Welcoming prayer and Braindance both can help us create neurological pathways to repair or replace detrimental pathways we may have acquired in early childhood.

While I was taking BrainDance teacher training, a whispering inner voice led me to combine BrainDance with the Welcoming Prayer. No one had ever used BrainDance as a way to meditate. I started with dancers then expanded to everyone interested in sharing the transformation and integration that is possible when practicing the Welcoming prayer with BrainDance. I call this practice Mindful-BrainDance.com. Since 2016, I have been leading people in this practice on a weekly basis.

After a year of engaging in these practices daily, I found that my

relationship with the Divine was different; I realized the Divine is not only an external entity. The embodied practice grounds me to the physical world and allows me to consent to the Divine Indwelling in new ways. I felt barriers fall away and my relationship with the Divine is now deeper than the lover and beloved I knew before.

Contemplative Outreach Hawai’i hosts Centering Prayer 1/2-day retreats on a monthly basis, and longer residential retreats a few times a year. I lead the Welcoming Prayer as an embodied practice as part of these events. Since January 2020 I have been leading Welcoming Prayer weekly in the Meditation Chapel (Meditationchapel.org) with people from around the world. In this venue we are largely still as we practice the embodiment of the Welcoming Prayer using our internal scans of the body. We return to *Be Still and Know that I am God*, as we consent to the Divine Indwelling

In October 2021 I led the “Welcoming Prayer Embodied: Consent on the Go” (tinyurl.com/WPConsentGO) at the Parliament of World religions where I was able to engage with an interfaith community as we embodied the reality that *Christ has no body now but yours*.

I am humbled by the circle of faith my life is taking. ☸



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Sinking Into Down Time

Outside the Walls

Beginning in late October, the Contemplative Outreach Prison Outreach Service Team (COPOST) established a weekly Zoom-based Centering Prayer group for the formerly incarcerated who practiced Centering Prayer “inside the walls.” Many thanks to the CO Chapter in Tallahassee, Florida for providing the Zoom platform.

Those who have lived inside the walls of a locked facility can attest that the period of transition from the inside to outside is often difficult on many levels. All who practice the contemplative lifestyle can attest that a regular and habitual practice of prayer can enable the freedom to engage in the fullness of life. This gathering is intended as an aid to that practice for those now “outside the walls”.

This group is a concrete recognition that the Body of Christ includes not only those who are “like” us, but also those who appear different on the surface – in age, background, skills, station in life, material wealth, etc. This gathering is a reminder that the Body, as a whole, is uplifted by the lifting up of its members.

For more information, or for the formerly incarcerated who wish to participate, please email to coprisonliaison@gmail.com.

By R. Fudge and N. Preston, lay contemplatives who were among the founding members of a Centering Prayer group inside the walls. R. has been practicing Centering Prayer for 9 years and N. for 6 years.

The shape of the world has fundamentally changed. The Covid-19 pandemic has rearranged everything and turned most conventional forms upside down. Workplaces, schools, medical facilities, public events, and countless other examples have been forced to adjust to the harsh realities of such an infectious and deadly disease.

The prison environment was no different. In the beginning of March of 2020, the Department of Corrections in our state closed its doors, no longer allowing outside visitors into facilities. In one day, we, inside the walls, lost access to our families, chapel volunteers, and for a handful of us, our Centering Prayer circles.

But just as the desert can hold unexpected beauty, this isolation has shaped us in unexpected ways.

At our institution, a policy of isolation was quickly adopted to stop the spread of the virus. Other than a few essential jobs, no one was allowed in or out of the dormitories. This continued for almost half a year. Religious services, visitation, and educational and vocational services were completely cut off. This included participation in our Centering Prayer circle. We went from having a weekly meeting to zero contact, even with each other, even in the dorms. The word “stressful” cannot begin to describe the mood and attitude during that time.

At first, the practice of one of us suffered for being isolated. One might imagine that the opportunities for prayer time would increase – that one would be freed of responsibility and set apart in peace in a cell. But the opposite proved true for one of us; it became difficult to pray. The tension between the reality of forced isolation and that of voluntary solitude was



stark. This was being “alone”, but also feeling alone in a way which was separated from God. As the lock-down progressed, however, the appearance of God's absence changed into something more than real, leading to a deep conviction that, regardless of what seemed to be the case, God was actually closer than breath, closer than passing thoughts and words and sensations of God.

One of us had a different experience. At the beginning of the pandemic, with regular group meetings at a halt, it quickly became very apparent just how much he had been depending on the encouragement of others to continue his practice. He was going to have to build in himself something which had been lacking: initiative. He had looked to his weekly Centering Prayer appointments as a cherished time of peace, silence, spiritual ecstasy, of consolation and of community. He truly enjoyed the sense of contemplative prayer and of the time spent in it. But until the support and foundation given him by the practice of his fellows fell to the silence of quarantines and lock-downs, he hadn't realized how much he actually depended on others to prompt what was and should have been an intimate and personal undertaking. He had to learn discipline in meditative prayer, independent of outside encouragement. Ultimately, he would say that the pandemic and isolation helped his Centering Prayer practice progress, because it pushed him to choose to develop a schedule for himself, to be self-motivated, and ultimately to open his routine for more prayer sessions than just once a week.

Our different paths to the same waystation led us to understand that we each have a hunger for the spiritual life and time with God. For each of us, once external support is withdrawn, that fire for the Holy Spirit was – and is – called to well up from within, to help us become stronger in our individual commitments to consent to God's presence and action, to be ever more fervent in returning to God through the sacred word.

Regular group meetings are slowly working their way back into our prison system. But now those days are supplements – welcome respites, but still supplements – to our ever-growing spiritual lives. For the authors, the circumstances of Covid have brought about “fruits” which haven't been all bad. Now, our weekly meetings have become one flower within a garden full of prayer blossoms. The Spirit has never felt closer. ☸

International Conference Follow-up

Did you miss the Saturday morning session, in which two formerly incarcerated practitioners shared their experience of practicing Centering Prayer while in prison? Visit the Prison Outreach Service Team's web pages for easy access to the recording of their heart-opening sharing.

Go to contemplativeoutreach.org and look for Prison Outreach on the Programs drop-down menu. Immediately under the names of the service team members you'll find links to the presentation, as well as to a list of various ways to get involved (even from home).

My Centering Prayer Formula

CHANGYEOP LEE

I'm a Korean Christian. I have been studying Buddhism in order to understand the deep meaning of the Bible and the gospels.

Buddhism is very helpful to access the dimension of consciousness found in these texts. And the practices of it are so useful for me to learn the method of prayer.

But it is hard for me to become accustomed to Christian prayer, actually. Verbal prayers do not seem to lead me to the union with Jesus or God.

The Jesus prayer was my favorite method of prayer for years — chanting or repeating in silence Jesus' name or phrases including the name of Jesus. It is apophatic not cataphatic. My Jesus prayer is "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me."

Along the way, one day I met the Centering Prayer (CP)! I found the Path (of prayer) in Christianity, which has been hidden so long deep within our tradition. It is non-verbal prayer and based on the evolutionary model of human consciousness.

I have been practicing Centering Prayer twice a day for about a year. I have read almost all of Fr. Thomas Keating's books about Centering Prayer in their Korean translations. They are very valuable for me.

The books of other authors like Basil Pennington, Carl Arico and Cynthia Bourgeault are very helpful for me to learn about the Centering Prayer and its background. And *Into The Silent Land* by Martin Laird is helpful to understand the contemplative dimension of Christian prayer.

In the course of becoming familiar with Centering Prayer and contemplative aspect of life, I hit upon an idea that I could write down the life of contemplative prayer in certain formulas. So I wrote one like this:

$$CTP = CP + LD$$

That is, Contemplative Prayer = Centering Prayer + Lectio Divina. It suggests that CP and LD are closely interrelated in contemplative prayer.

Then, I want to make clear the essential elements of each part: $CTP = CP(4r + 3d) + LD(4R)$

CP(4r + 3D) means, in Centering Prayer, we meet our 'thoughts' with attitudes of 4R's: Resist no thought + Retain no thought + React to no thought + Return ever-so-gently to sacred word. And there are 3 dispositions in CP, so to speak, consent/opening to Divine Presence and action within us + self-surrender + transformation.

And LD(4R) means in Lectio Divina, we are in four interrelated stages: Reading + Ruminatio/Reflecting + Responding/Praying + Resting in God/Contemplation.

And the reading of the Scriptures consists of four ways of literal, moral, allegorical, and unitive reading of the texts according to Fr. Thomas Keating.

In addition, when I heard about Welcoming Prayer of Mary Mrozowski, I thought it was the essential prayer and attitude in contemplative life—accepting reality as it is, not through our emotional programs for happiness and false self. So, I want to include Jesus Prayer (JP) and Welcoming Prayer (WP) in my formula. So the formula unfolds like this:

$$CTP = CP(4r + 3D) + LD(4R) + JP + WP$$

If we live and pray according to this formula, we practice Centering Prayer twice a day and Lectio Divina at least once a week, and do Jesus Prayer during casual activities like washing dishes, showering, taking a walking, waiting in lines, etc., and do Welcoming prayer in challenging times.

However, our prayers are not isolated from our lives. Robert Mulholland, Jr. says that contemplation should naturally become embodied in our lives and the energy of prayer becomes enfolded in our actions, that is to say, contemplation should be incarnated in our lives. So he consider the incarnatio, or the living out the text as the fifth component of LD, and Fr. Thomas Keating regards the fifth stage of LD as our becoming the Word of God. However, I would like to distinguish between the contemplative prayer and its fruits.

Therefore, my formula becomes like this in the end. Contemplative Life = Contemplative Prayer + Incarnatio or, in short: CTL(4S) = CTP + I.

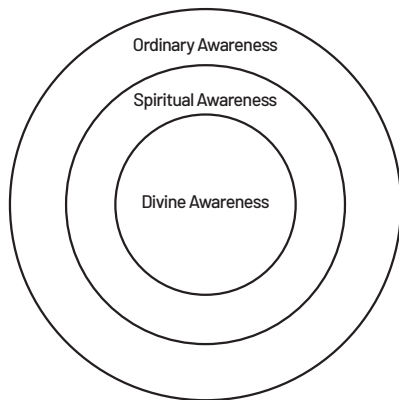
In here, 4S means that contemplative life can be expressed in 4S: Silence, Solitude, Solidarity, and Service, as they are in the Contemplative Outreach logo.

In summary, I lay out my formula for Centering Prayer and contemplative life here:

- 1) CTL(4S) = CTP + I
- 2) CTP = CP(4r + 3D) + LD(4R) + JP + WP

And I have some proposition in regard to background concepts of CP. It is just little opinion about them.

Thomas Keating's 'Bull's eye diagram of level of awareness' is like below. I think this diagram shows the level of awareness according to our learning level of deepening insights during CP.



At first, we know only ordinary awareness. As we practice CP twice every day for weeks, months, we would recognize the spiritual awareness within our mind.

And then as our insights deepens more and more with CP, we access the Divine Awareness in the most depth of our mind.

So this diagram reflects the level of our awakening. However, the order and scope of the awarenesses have to be reversed in the perspective of existence.

Ordinary awareness is the smallest, and is only within our narrow mind of ordinary mind or false self.

False self has the narrowest awareness of selfishness, actually.

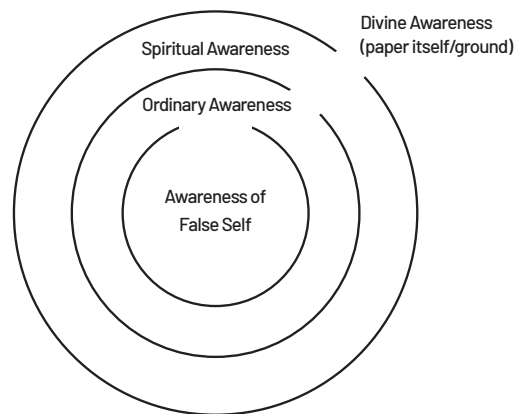
But, as we practice CP continuously, our awareness will expand toward the spiritual awareness, nearer to the true self, which is broader than our ordinary mind or false self.

And then, the more our insights deepen with the help of CP, the nearer we access the Divine Awareness in the most depth of our mind.

By the way, as God is not only within us, but also everywhere, Divine Awareness is much more spacious than spiritual awareness.

In fact, Divine Awareness cannot be limited in a circle, and it is the ground itself, that is the paper itself on which we draw the diagram. And all levels of awarenesses are not closed entities or separated from one another, but have openings to the higher or deeper and more spacious levels of awarenesses.

So the diagram of level of awareness according to existential perspective is to be like below.



I have got this insight from Ken Wilber, actually.

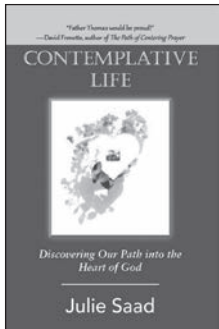
How do you think about my formula and this diagram?

I appreciate deeply to the late Fr. Thomas Keating and co-workers in Contemplative Outreach for their efforts to introduce and spread CP and contemplative dimension of Christianity in this world and for us. ☸

ChangYeop Lee is a dentist managing a private dental office in Korea. A Christian interested in the historical Jesus, spirituality of Jesus, and teachings of Buddhism, like Lojong practice. A layman who has found the path of prayer in Centering Prayer and is practicing it twice a day.

RESOURCES IN OUR ONLINE STORE

NEW

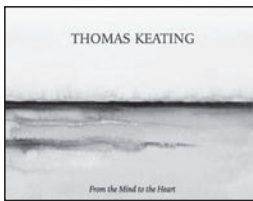


Contemplative Life: Discovering Our Path into The Heart of God by Julie Saad

This book begins with this sentence: "Contemplative life begins when we take the first step into the silence of our heart."

And continues: "It's a pilgrimage—a journey that takes us first to the inner reaches of who we really are, and from there, into the life we were meant to live. We don't usually start a journey like this unless we're searching, even longing, for a different way of life. The search often begins when we experience an existential crisis, a trauma, a loss, or sometimes just a weariness with the way life is. It may be a search for purpose or meaning, or a desire for a deeper connection with the Ultimate Mystery. As any spiritual pilgrim knows, the journey is one of mystery and discovery. It's a different path for every person with one experience common to all: every person who embarks on the journey will be changed by it. It doesn't matter where you are on your life's path, whether you're young or old, experienced in prayer or a novice, religious, spiritual, agnostic, or none of the above. What matters is that something deep in the silence of your heart called you to take the first step."

Writing from her lived experience on the contemplative journey for well over 30 years, Julie's book shows how a life dedicated to contemplative life can be transformed. \$17.99 USD



Thomas Keating: From The Mind to The Heart

This beautifully illustrated book with the paintings of Charlotte M. Frieze comes from the conversations Fr. Keating had with his friend John Osborne in 2010 for the film, *The Rising Tide of Silence* and three years later for the film, *From the Mind To The Heart*. Fr. Keating's thoughts about silence and contemplation, power and the false self, and humankind's shifting relationship with God have emerged in the film and this companion book. \$25 USD

OTHER RESOURCES



<https://www.youtube.com/c/outreach>

There are hundreds of free resources on the Contemplative Outreach YouTube channel, including these newly-posted offerings:

- ▶ *Contemplative Vision: Awakening to Beauty, Truth & Goodness with Thomas Keating & Richard Rohr*
- ▶ Search under the Playlists tab for more video series



Newly Updated

Centering Prayer Mobile App Timer

- French-language option added for both iOS and Android devices
- The Welcoming Prayer practice
- New sound options, including two chants and The Our Father prayed by Thomas Keating

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United in Prayer Day

Sat • March 5, 2022

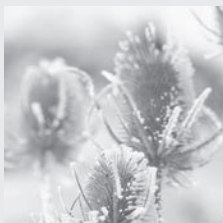
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While formed by our respective denominations,
we are bonded through the experience of Christ
in Centering Prayer and in daily life.

CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE #10

