



# The Unfolding of Centering Prayer



Thomas Keating

The essence and heart of Centering Prayer is consenting to God's presence and action within. It leads to contemplation and its continuing development. The following qualities reveal how this consent deepens through daily practice.

1. **Silence** arises in consenting to God's presence within. External silence supports this movement and leads to interior silence.

2. **Solitude** flows from interior silence. It disregards the endless conversation we have with ourselves and rests in the experience of God's presence.

3. **Solidarity** is the growing awareness of our oneness with the whole human family and with all creation. It is sensitive to the ever-present inspirations of the Spirit, not only during the time of formal prayer, but in the details of everyday life.

4. **Service** is an expression of solidarity that is an inner call to serve God and others based on the realization that God is loving and serving them through us. In other words, God in us is serving God in others.

5. **Stillness** is what Jesus called "prayer in secret" (Matt. 6:6). This is the experience of God's presence beyond rational concepts and preoccupation with our thoughts and desires. Interior silence tends to move into solitude and then into stillness. Stillness is the habitat of contemplative prayer. As Saint John of the Cross teaches, contemplation is the inflowing of God into our souls, and in the Christian tradition, is looked upon as pure gift. In actual fact, it is *a gift that has already been given*. Just by being human, one has this capacity. Many advanced mystics affirm that contemplation is the natural state of human consciousness, of which the Garden of Eden in Genesis is a symbol.

6. **Simplicity** is the growing capacity to live in the midst of the dualities of daily



life in such a way as to integrate contemplation and action. Even in enormous activity, endless distraction, and immense concerns, we can remain in the divine presence. That presence invites us to enter the inmost center of our being where God dwells and where the Spirit inspires all our actions. Simplicity is the final integration and unification of all our human capabilities. It is the peak sustained by a whole mountain of interconnected and interdependent parts, in which each acts according to its particular nature in complete harmony with every other part. Simplicity arises out of the immense complexity of human nature as it is brought into unity through letting go of attachments and trusting in God.

The first step towards this simplicity is simplicity of lifestyle and the cultivation of interior silence through contemplation. Contemplative prayer and action under its influence gradually liberates us from attachments both conscious and unconscious that cause the loss of interior peace. It moderates the tumultuous emotions that can tear us apart and undermine the sense of being rooted in God and in the state of life we have embraced.

Contemplation is not the same as action, but they are not separate. They are distinct, but God is as much in one as in the other. It is we who may not be present to one or the other. Simplicity is based on the truth about ourselves and the experience of God. It is the acceptance of everything just as it is. The Holy Spirit can then move us to change what needs to be changed or do what needs to be done.

**7. Absolute Surrender** is the total gift of self to God, a movement from divine union to unity. It marks the beginning of what Jesus calls “eternal life” as an abiding state of consciousness. Self-surrender through the practice of Centering Prayer is a traditional path to divine union. The movements of self-surrender and trust are the work of the Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit, and of the increasing joy of giving oneself completely to God.

Knowing the Ultimate Reality as Unmanifest is to lose oneself completely. This is the invitation of the amazing texts in Saint John’s Gospel about *our being in God and God living in us*. (cf. Jn 17: 20-22).

Suffering is the consequence of the fact of living in an imperfect world. For that there is no cure. Sharing the divine life does not mean that created things are not good; it is just that they are incapable of fulfilling our boundless desire for perfect happiness. Nothing could be more down to earth or more humbling than this ever-present Presence, which just *is*. It does not have to prove itself. It does not need to acquire anything. It just *is*. Its desire is to make us equal to Itself in the expanding interior freedom that goes with that unity.

As we experience the dynamic unfolding of grace, our perspective changes in regard to God, the spiritual journey, and ourselves. In between these stages there may be delightful plateaus which are great blessings and have huge physical, mental, and spiritual effects. The dark nights are psychological states, and the darkest of all is the spiritual suffering that arises from being a creature, unable because of our weakness to handle the difficulties we encounter in this life, but going through them with invincible confidence in God’s infinite mercy. ☩



PATRICIA JOHNSON, ADMINISTRATOR

## Looking Through the Rear View Window of our Moving Vehicle

**W**OW!! One whole year has passed since I said “yes” to the position of Interim Administrator, knowing in my heart that this was the right decision, despite a whole lot of unknowns reeling around my brain. But the heart said “yes.”

Mary Anne Best had graciously sent me the 2017 plan so I could look it over. What struck me immediately was the first line under the plan for staff: “We hold a vision of embodying Divine Love in the world ...” This was the confirming sign for the yes in my heart.

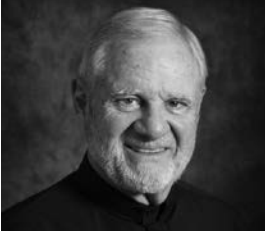
And then I looked at the intentions for the staff. There was not a single one that I couldn’t embrace wholeheartedly. And so we began.

Communication, Collaboration, and Cooperation with all the different bodies of the organism is a priority for this position. I soon learned that this was both a huge undertaking and a joyous one. Huge because the organism is global, and joyous because it involves relationships that keeps on growing toward trust and intimacy. Utilizing communication, collaboration, and cooperation, the shift from a corporate structure to a contemplative community has evolved at a fairly rapid pace this first year and will grow even more rapidly in the upcoming year.

There has been a move toward transparency and availability in every area of operation.

At the International Conference in September 2017, all the service team leaders attended as well as many team members, local volunteers and interested practitioners. The intention of the conference was to deepen the experience of the new Vision, Theological Principles, and Guidelines for Service that Fr. Thomas had initiated this past year with new language in tune with our evolution over 30 years. The grassroots level of involvement was palpable. The excitement of knowing they were being invited to tell the Administration and the Governing Board what their needs are, that they were being heard, and there would be a response was contagious. Respect and awe for the ideas and creativity that came from each of the 15 tables left me very happy and proud to be a part of this organism.

This past August, the four Christian contemplative organizations headed by Laurence Freeman (World Community for Christian Meditation), Richard Rohr (Center for Action and Contemplation), Tilden Edwards (Shalem Institute), and Thomas Keating (Contemplative Outreach) initiated a five-day workshop with 21 persons under the age of 40 at St. Benedict’s Monastery retreat center. This was a follow-up workshop to the initial meeting of the founders in October 2016. I was particularly struck by the diversity of participants’ spiritual paths and passions. The intelligence, humility, creativity, care and concern for our global planet emanating from these young persons was powerful, and will clearly evolve as they process the time together in their inmost beings over the next few months. We thank The Trust for the Meditation Process for making this workshop possible through their funding support. ☸



FR. CARL J. ARICO

## Two Thomases Together

I had a dream. Walking along the road to Emmaus, I came upon two men arguing and discussing the events which had taken place in Jerusalem – the manifestation of Jesus Christ in all levels of existence. I introduced myself and asked if I could walk with them. I listened intently as they talked about the rest of the story — the contemplative journey — the call to be transformed and enter into unity consciousness with the divine. I was spellbound. Although I did not understand all they were saying, I felt myself intuitively responding to the truth of it all. They then invited me to join them at table. I sat dining on their words and the lively discussion. We soon entered silent prayer. When the prayer ended, I opened my eyes and they were gone. I knew something had changed within me; I felt renewed. As I looked around the room, I noticed they had left their business cards: one from Thomas Merton and one from Thomas Keating.

They were companions on the journey and I had the privilege of experiencing them together.

Dreams do come true.

For me, Thomas Keating created a conceptual framework for the Christian contemplative journey and Thomas Merton embodied the contemplative journey and reached out to connect with social challenges, allowing his heart to be touched by the realities of the world. Their lives and works are different sides of the same coin.\*

The two Thomases have been spiritual guides in my life. The challenge for me is how to take their teachings and make them a daily reality.

Well, I found a way.

I have two daily readers on my Kindle – one with the teachings of Thomas Keating and one with the teachings of Thomas Merton. Each day I set aside time and I ask my spiritual guides, “Well my friends, what do you have for me today?” I then read and listen for words or phrases that catch my attention and I weave a spiritual quilt for the day.

For example, on October 4th, the feast of St Francis of Assisi, the Thomas Keating selection was from *Intimacy with God* on Centering Prayer. These words caught my attention: humble method, new light, self-surrender and trust.

The Thomas Merton selection was a journal entry from 1965 and what caught my attention was, “it is given,” and “beginning to know what life really is.”

I pondered both sets of words for a time. What emerged as my spiritual quilt for the day was, “The humble method of Centering Prayer, which is a gift given, brings to me a new light to know for the first time what life really is when it opens to self-surrender and trust.”

This became my active insight prayer for the day.

More needs to be said about these two great contemplatives of our time. I celebrate their spiritual companionship and teachings in my own being each day. I see Thomas Keating standing on the shoulders of Thomas Merton. I have a dream that someday the two of them will be acknowledged as companions on the journey. ☸

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\*Thomas Keating in the *Spiritual Journey* series used St Anthony of the Desert Fathers as a paradigm of the spiritual journey (the story was not only effective but humorous; if you have not seen it, please do); I always thought that a current example could be Thomas Merton. That is why I dedicated a chapter to him in my book, *A Taste of Silence*.

Fr. Carl's daily readers are: *The Daily Reader for Contemplative Living: Excerpts from the Works of Thomas Keating*, compiled by S. Stephanie Iachetta and *A Day with Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations from his Journal*, selected and edited by Jonathan Montaldo.





## *Contemplative Grieving*

by Julie Saad

I never understood what people meant by a broken heart until July 11, 2016. My brother, who was riding his motorcycle home from work, collided with a drunk driver who ran a stop sign. I had been home for about three hours from an 11-day private retreat in Snowmass. My sister-in-law called telling me Steve had been in a terrible accident and I better come. I tried to tell her that sometimes when someone is in a coma it is giving him the opportunity to heal from the injuries. She said, “I don’t know. They are saying it’s not good. You need to get here as soon as you can.”

I live in Denver, Colorado and my brother lived in Champaign, Illinois, 1,040 miles from me. At first I was all business – the best flight I could find left at 8:30 pm and arrived in Champaign at 9:30 am. Should I just get in the car and start driving? Too dangerous as tired as I was. I finished the one load of laundry I had started, repacked my dirty clothes, and had a friend drive me to the airport. For some reason I grabbed the prayer shawl that I used in Snowmass. As I sat in the airport waiting to board the plane it started to hit me. I was shivering a little so I wrapped up in my prayer shawl. Warmth and comfort. “Oh God, come to my assistance. Oh Lord, make haste to help me.”

My first flight was to Phoenix, 500 miles in the wrong direction. What was going on in Champaign? Was he still alive? If he was, what condition was he in? Did he have a brain injury? Was he paralyzed? How long was I going to be staying? What about my dog who had already been with my friend for 11 days? The trunk of my body was in an uproar — waves of emotion, starting in my gut, roiling through my stomach and heart. No way to stop it, control it, repress it. The only thing I could think to do was the Welcoming Prayer. “I let go of my desire for security, affection, control and embrace this moment as it is. Welcome. Welcome. Welcome.” Thank God I had been practicing this prayer for over 20 years and it came to me. Crying in public when no one else knows what’s going on is hard for me. I wanted to be invisible. My prayer shawl and my Welcoming Prayer helped me to feel invisible, and yet wrapped in God’s comfort.

I spent hours in the Phoenix airport waiting for my flight to Chicago. Welcome. Welcome. Welcome. More waiting in Chicago. Long walk from one end of the concourse to the other. Welcome. Then finally on the flight to Champaign. My brother-in-law picked me up at the airport. “It’s not good.”

When I arrived at the hospital my sister pulled me into a hug and said, “It’s just me and you now.” He was pronounced dead about 15 minutes before I arrived. Since he was an organ donor he was still on life support. His body was still warm, he was breathing and his heart was beating, but he was gone. The first thing I remember saying was, “I’ve only been on this earth for 11 months without him.” When I was alone in the room with him I said, “I’m not ready for you to be gone,” as the tears turned into sobs.

In the days that followed family and friends drew close. The shock and pain was palpable, for me almost unbearable. I couldn't even begin to imagine what my sister-in-law was going through because I couldn't get a deep breath. Finally a friend of mine said to me, "Ask Steve to help you. He wouldn't want you to be in this much pain." I could do that. And it helped.

There was the flag-raising ceremony at the hospital the day before they took him to harvest his organs. They raise the "donate life" flag and leave it up as long as the organ donor is in the hospital. We didn't want a chaplain praying during the ceremony, but my sister nudged me and said, "Maybe you could say a prayer." The only prayer I could think of was the St. Francis prayer and it seemed so appropriate:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,  
Grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console;  
To be understood, as to understand;  
To be loved, as to love;  
For it is in giving that we receive,  
Pardoning that we are pardoned,  
And dying that we are born to eternal life.

I couldn't do Centering Prayer during this time, even though it has been my daily practice for 23 years. The best I could do was be present to the pain, my pain and my family's pain. We planned to let the chaplain do the memorial service until my niece said, "We should do something to plan this." She looked at me and said, "And I think you should go first." I said okay because I knew God would help me find the right words. My practice and the teaching I have done for Contemplative Outreach in Denver taught me how to be vulnerable in front of groups of people and to talk through my tears. You can't authentically teach

the Welcoming Prayer or the Forgiveness Prayer, or sometimes even Lectio Divina, without being vulnerable and offering your own life examples.

I woke up at 4:30 am on the day of the memorial service and got out my computer to write a little of what was coming to me to say. As often happens in times of trouble, something from Scripture will emerge. Even though Steve wasn't religious I knew he wouldn't mind if I read something that was helpful to me and that others might find helpful.

From Luke 11:33-36:

*No one who lights a lamp hides it away or places it [under a bushel basket], but on a lampstand so that those who enter might see the light.*

*The lamp of the body is your eye. When your eye is sound, then your whole body is filled with light, but when it is bad, then your body is in darkness.*

*Take care, then, that the light in you not become darkness.*

*If your whole body is full of light, and no part of it is in darkness, then it will be as full of light as a lamp illuminating you with its brightness.*

I ended by saying, "I know all of us will always carry a little of Steve's light in our hearts."

I don't remember life on this planet without my little brother and it took me many months to figure out how to go on without him. At first I didn't want to. The pain was unbearable. When we were little kids we were together all the time. People often thought we were twins. I moved to Colorado when we were young adults, but we had the kind of relationship where we picked up right where we left off any time we talked or saw each other. We could talk on the phone for hours and not realize how much time had gone by. In recent years we often sent text messages about the things of daily life, and communicated through Facebook almost every day. No one else knows and shares my life story like my little brother did. No one and nothing can ever replace that loss in my life. There is a great big hole in my life where this relationship used to be. I still think of him every day. I will never be the same. I will never get over this. And yet we find a way to go on.

The man who killed my brother entered treatment shortly after the accident and because he was in a

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your way to forgive God.*

dual-diagnosis program (mental illness and substance abuse) the court continued to allow him to postpone even entering a plea for nine months. He finally pleaded guilty on May 1, 2017 and his sentencing hearing was scheduled for July 24, 2017. I planned to attend that hearing to face him.

In late June I started to realize something was really off. I am an emotional overeater and had been in a program to help me with that for over a year. I recognized that my eating behavior was out of control, was affecting my mood and that I needed to do something about it. The anniversary of my brother's death was approaching along with this hearing. I hadn't been on a retreat since July of last year, and felt strongly that I needed the healing that comes with a retreat experience.

For a number of reasons, I was unable to go away on an extended retreat so I decided to try creating an eight-day post-intensive at home. I wasn't sure I could do it because there are so many distractions at home. The first thing I did was turn the sound off on my phone. I rose at 5:00 am every day and started the day with spiritual reading and/or Lectio Divina, logging (a contemplative writing practice), and an hour of Centering Prayer. I ate breakfast and then took the dogs to the dog park for a two-mile walk. Upon returning I colored in a coloring book called *Inspire: Psalms*. I knew coloring would keep me out of my head and from trying to figure out what was wrong with me. I did another hour of Centering Prayer at 11:00 followed by lunch. In the afternoon I took a nap or read from a spiritual book. Sometimes I just sat on the patio and enjoyed the day. At 4:00 I did my third hour of Centering Prayer followed by dinner. In the evenings I would watch something like Super Soul Sunday or read. This retreat seemed to be just what I needed and I'm so grateful the idea came to me and that I had the willingness to try it.

I was in Snowmass for a few days before I went to Champaign for the sentencing hearing. I had the opportunity to visit with Father Thomas. He asked me what I knew about the man who killed my brother. The answer was not much. I knew he was 32 years old, an Iraq war veteran, and had been suicidal after the accident, which was what started him down the road of treatment. I told him that I felt this man had already given himself a life sentence because I don't know how one goes on after knowing that your reckless behavior caused someone's death. We talked about moral injury, which is something different than PTSD. He gave me a PBS documentary, *Almost Sunrise*, about a vet who walked from Milwaukee to California to raise awareness and funds for treatment of moral injury. One of the things Father Thomas said to the vet that impressed him greatly was that you have to find a way to forgive yourself, but you also have to find your way to forgive God. Food for thought.

I haven't believed for a long, long time that God controls the machinations of human beings and yet I wondered if I didn't need to forgive God. I have no doubt my brother is okay and that he wants me to get on with my life. I went to the sentencing hearing and faced this man, who I have no doubt is suffering, and I read my victim's statement. We made eye contact as I read this to him:

"To the man who caused this terrible accident I say you too will never be the same. I don't know how one goes on, knowing that you caused someone's death. Regardless of what this court system does to you, you have given yourself a life sentence. I wish I could say I forgive you, but I'm not there yet. I know that not forgiving you hurts me more than it does you. They say a broken heart is an open heart and I hope to one day find forgiveness there. My hope for you is that you find a way to turn this around and do some good in the world. I know that accepting the consequences for one's behavior can go a long ways towards healing. Help others realize how devastating the consequences can be for driving drunk, not just for yourself, but also for your victims."

He was sentenced to four years in prison and started his sentence on July 31, 2017. ☸

# My Experience of the Contemplative Gathering in Snowmass

by Rafael Dickson Morales

Last year, the founders of four contemporary Christian contemplative movements (Fr. Thomas Keating, of Contemplative Outreach; Fr. Laurence Freeman, of the World Community of Christian Meditation; Fr. Richard Rohr, of the Center for Action and Contemplation; and Tilden Edwards, of the Shalem Institute) gathered for a week of dialogue and meditation at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. As a result of that meeting, they came up with an extraordinary idea: to gather a group of committed younger contemplatives from their respective movements to share for a few days on the practice of contemplative prayer. Each of the founders invited five younger members to attend the meeting (from now on referred to as "the Gathering"), which was held at St. Benedict's Monastery from August 14-18, 2017.

By the sole grace of the Spirit and without any merit on my part, I received an amazing and loving invitation from Fr. Thomas Keating in mid-October 2016. I never expected in my wildest dreams to be part of this unique opportunity to share fellowship and prayer, but with an open and grateful heart, I said yes. That is how my journey with the Gathering began, allowing the unknown and the Spirit to guide my steps to better serve Extensión Contemplativa Internacional (ECI) and my home Centering Prayer community in the Dominican Republic.

The initial intent of the Gathering was to promote an exchange of our evolving experience, understanding, and practice of Christian contemplative prayer among practitioners from different backgrounds, cultures and affiliations.

Along with the founders, Sabina Alkire from the United Kingdom, Sarah Bachelard from Australia, Sizzo Claus from Switzerland, Leonardo Correa from Brazil, Vladimir Volrab from the Czech Republic, and I from the Dominican Republic participated in the meeting. The representation from the United States was as follows: Adam Bucko, from Wisconsin; Phileena Heuertz from Nebraska; Stuart Higginbotham from Georgia; Erik Keeney from Colorado; Mark Kutolowski from Vermont; Justin Lanier from Vermont; Bo Karen Lee from New Jersey; Mark Longhurst from Massachusetts; Rory McEntree from New Jersey; Kirsten Oates from California; Karen Pedigo from Illinois; Jessica Smith from Washington, DC; Gabrielle Stoner from Michigan; and Matthew Wright from New York. Margaret Benefiel, Executive Director of Shalem, facilitated our conversations over the four days, and the entire event was funded by the Trust for the Meditation Process.

Upon arrival in Snowmass, Mark Kutolowski and I, who had been invited by Fr. Keating, had the privilege of meeting him in private. The





conversation was very friendly and intimate, and it gave me the first insight into the purpose of the gathering: to know and relate to each other in a more profound and personal level, getting to know one another's backgrounds, experiences and interests.

Every morning started with a 6:30 am meditation, followed by the Eucharist in the monastery chapel. Instead of the latter, we were given the option to simply enjoy the Grand Silence instead. This was a moving experience that continued in the small group sharing that began at 9:30 am. Throughout the day, we practiced two more meditation periods and had a plenary session.

The first day, the dialogue started in small groups with the invitees. Later, we shared all together with the founders to summarize the small groups discussions. The same schedule continued during the next three days. There was a great sense of freedom, since small groups were formed by the preference of each participant and with a methodology of open space. Among the topics discussed that resonated the most with me were:

- Networking: how to connect and harness the wisdom of the contemplative spectrum.
- Formation and educational models within and across spiritual traditions and at different levels.
- Integration of contemplative practices and the public sphere: How can a contemplative approach to life be transmitted to the economic, political, and business world and its leadership? Personal sphere: Integration of contemplation from the start with one's vocation; contemplation as the groundwork for active life, integration of contemplation within marriage and family life, integration of contemplation and priestly ministry.

Throughout these days I reflected a great deal on how I can contribute to the integration process between the public and the personal spheres. Another aspect that touched my heart was the founders' response to our dialogue and their desire to interact with all participants on a more personal level. I was also deeply moved by the humility of the founders and the deep trust of these four contemplative leaders in the work of the Holy Spirit in our generation and

in the whole world. This reaffirmed for me the unity of the Body of Christ.

After a couple of days, a significant shift occurred. We started to relate to each other with more openness and vulnerability, and friendships began to deepen. We were not sharing anymore from our knowledge and our minds, but consenting to the flow of whatever came from our hearts, our fears and our hope for the whole world and for ourselves. As we chanted "become a whole world, for a whole world," the sense of unity was like nothing I had ever experienced. Perhaps we were relieving the wounds of the world without even knowing it.

The final day continued in that mood of union and deepening relationship. Since we were in the sacred valley of Snowmass, a hike through the mountains was proposed. At the top of the mountain we shared a moment of silent prayer. I felt deeply united with nature, humanity and the world.

At the last plenary session, we shared ways and possible scenarios in which we can all collaborate at ever deepening levels that also include those contemplative groups that were unable to attend this Gathering. The highlight of the session was the opportunity to listen and to speak with each other regarding our practice, our personal journey, as well as our achievements and struggles, in light of the Christian contemplative tradition and the wisdom of our founders.

My soul is full of gratitude and love for everything we shared. I feel great joy in being part of a community of love that regards contemplation as the heart of the Christian life. Deep thanks also to our respective founders for all the love and unity they have spread throughout the world. This was a very simple, but very profound life-changing experience. What we lived during those days is only the beginning. I look forward with hope and enthusiasm for what is yet to come, trusting that the Spirit will guide and show us the path toward the future. We only need to be alert, connected, open, and consent to whatever the Spirit may bring. It will be a very interesting and awesome journey. ☸

# Allowing God to Heal Our Shame: *From Hiding to Healing*

by Ray Leonardini, Prison Contemplative Fellowship

An ongoing practice of Centering Prayer eventually leads us to confront the reality of shame. Not the rightful shame we feel when we know we've done something wrong, but the unconscious toxic shame that dwells in our deep psyche. This shame is one of the most daunting obstacles to divine healing and transformation. In prisons, because of institutional dehumanization, it is both pervasive and invisible, hard to bear, and harder to talk about. Intimations of shame slip out in private discussions with prisoners when they say: "I feel like a complete phony" or "I feel like God is disgusted with me." At high security prisons, because any kind of interiority is superseded by pervasive preoccupation with survival, uncovering toxic shame is nearly impossible.

When describing the origins of the false self, a prison Centering Prayer facilitator may obliquely mention shame in passing, and possibly be able to talk about the nature of shame, or may speak of a shameful moment in his or her own life. But, in my experience, many prisoners are unaware of the shame they carry and are resistant to talking about it. For these prisoners, shame is unspeakable. It remains shrouded in the deep unconscious, protected by life-long defense mechanisms, yet unknowingly functioning as a chief source of motives and actions.

## One Prisoner's Story

Andrew (not his actual name), with a long-time Centering Prayer practice, described his shame this way:

*When I was first in elementary school, maybe first or second grade, I went into the bathroom. In there was an older kid, maybe fifth grade. Whatever he was doing, he didn't want me in there. He grabbed me and forced me to put my hands into a full toilet bowl and squish the material in the bowl.*

*I don't remember much after that except that I was able to wash my hands before I went back into the classroom. But, I didn't tell anyone. It has taken me nearly 60 years to be able to allow myself to sit in silence, without judgment, with this pain. Only after this sitting in silence, could I begin to speak about it. During these many years I didn't recognize how desperately I tried to avoid remembering this experience. I could not feel my shame or even think about the incident. If the slightest hint of the feeling ever emerged I thought I'd rather die, or kill someone, than feel that feeling. The core of the shame, I know now, however irrational, was the constant self-reproach: how could I let this happen to me without fighting back?*

*Somewhere deep inside I unconsciously resolved that I was not going to allow myself to ever feel my degrading powerlessness ever again! I can see now it directed much of my rage all through my life. It's like nothing that anyone outside of me, police or guards, could do to me would match my own personal shame.*



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a loving God.*

In some mysterious way, the victims in shameful encounters like Andrew's often take on entire responsibility for the event. They do not recognize their own relative innocence and give themselves the benefit of the doubt. It's as if the unspeakable nature of the shame disables and distorts an essential view of themselves. For Andrew, in some way his shame meant he didn't have the right to exist. This razor to the soul cuts the psyche so insidiously that the individual doesn't know they may be bleeding to death.

### **The Way Out of Our Shame**

Toxic shame is a core factor in the development of the false self; we try to avoid at any cost the feeling of shame that pervades our sense of self. Depth therapists like Alice Miller and John Bradshaw tell us that toxic shame is passed on from generation to generation. Marriages can be derailed through partners' failure to recognize the core of shame that

shapes their behavior. A major outcome of toxic shame is an inability to experience intimacy.<sup>1</sup> As it is more and more deeply internalized, it becomes the driving force behind an increasing sense of isolation and abandonment. It has taken Andrew the better part of a life-time to become aware of his feelings of shame and talk about them.

As shame is an obstacle to human intimacy, so also to a Centering Prayer practice based on intimacy with God. How can we freely accept the invitation to intimacy with the Divine if our fundamental human affections are blunted by personal shame? How can we take in the love of God if we experience ourselves to be unlovable and incapable of intimacy?

Psychologists agree that the way out of toxic shame is to externalize our shame by confiding in one individual about our sense of personal soul-loathing along with our belief that we've lost our right to exist. From the perspective of the spiritual journey, the way out of toxic shame is allowing God to love us. Healing begins when we can own up to our sense of estrangement from God, and open up to the possibility of a relationship with a loving God. In my experience, this foundational transformation comes about through a combination of kataphatic and apophatic prayer. Kataphatic practices of reading biblical stories, using guided meditations and liturgical prayer allow us to look into our lives while looking into the nature of God.<sup>2</sup>

For example, reading the story of the Prodigal Son slowly in the manner of *lectio divina*, opens a way to reflection about how God loves us unconditionally without worthiness or merit. Prisoners understand that neither son loved the father. Both sons were relating to the father in self-centered ways. Prisoners also understand that the father knew that his sons did not love him in the way he loved them. This is often the initial point of discovery: they recognize that this Father loves his sons no matter what. Prisoners wonder: *is it possible that this God loves me in the same fashion, knowing that I come to him more in fear than in love?*

<sup>1</sup> Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame That Binds You*, Health Communications, Deerfield Beach Florida, 1988, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Wilkie and Noreen Au, *God's Unconditional Love: Healing Our Shame*, Paulist Press, 2016.



## Allowing Ourselves To Be Seen

Spiritual directors and transpersonal psychologists agree that the process of externalization, that is, telling our story to at least one person who will simply hear us and not judge us, gets us on the path of healing. They also agree that this is not enough to reach the depths of toxic shame in our psyche.

Practitioners of Centering Prayer know by their own experience that only through the apophatic experience of receptive prayer, sitting and allowing God to see us, and the unloading of the unconscious, does profound healing emerge. It is our personal encounter with the Unutterable, the Ultimate Mystery whom Jesus called “Father in secret,” beyond our conscious awareness, that reaches the source of our toxic shame.

As Andrew puts it: *“The more I sit in the pain, the less I hurt, the less I hurt, the more I feel, and the more I experience the release of my shame.”*

The simple suggestion in Centering Prayer to let go of thoughts, and detach from our stories about our thoughts, awakens awareness of powerful emotions of shame. Our humble consent in Centering Prayer prepares us to address shame as an existential issue, not simply as a behavioral problem. The full power of simply sitting in silence, and not running away from the tsunami that overtakes us, allows Divine Therapy to unfold. As we sit and consent to “be seen,” the contemplative experience takes us deeper into the unutterable mystery of intimate relationship with God.

Once prisoners experience the full force of unloading the unconscious, if properly prepared, they can allow the overwhelming sense of shame into their awareness. As a practical matter, in prison Centering Prayer groups, the possibility of accessing our shame comes only when the group is small, the members have a Centering Prayer practice, understand some notion of the unloading of the unconscious, and have, however fleeting, an experience of intimacy with God. ☸

*Contemplative Outreach sends this printed newsletter to U.S. prisoners in over 465 prison who have received Centering Prayer materials through Prison Contemplative Fellowship. Anyone interested in facilitating Centering Prayer groups in prisons and jails can email Ray at [office@uspcf.org](mailto:office@uspcf.org). Prisoners can write directly for information on Centering Prayer, and how to start Centering Prayer groups in prisons, to Prison Contemplative Fellowship, P.O. Box 1086, Folsom, CA 95763-1086.*





A greeting from Fionnuala Quinn, International Coordinator. Words and images to savour over the season.

## *Christmas Season*

by John Tauler, a 14th-century German Dominican mystic.

*It is certain that if God is to be born in the soul  
It must turn back to eternity  
It must turn in toward itself with all its might,  
Must recall itself,  
And consecrate all its faculties within itself,  
The lowest as well as the highest,  
All its dissipated powers must be gathered up into one,  
Because unity is strength.*

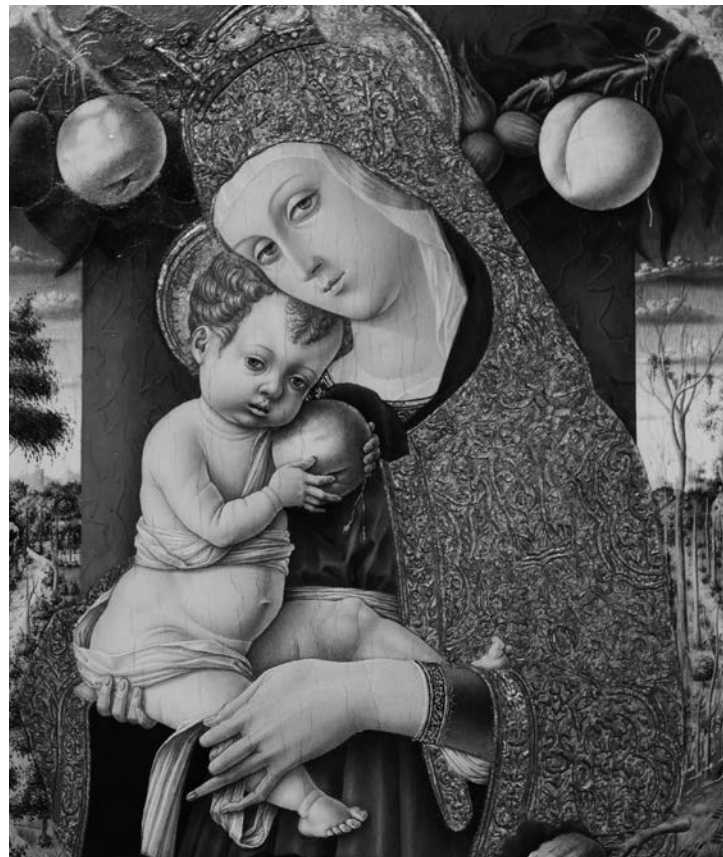
*Next the soul must go out.  
It must travel away from itself, above itself.  
There must be nothing left in us  
but a pure intention towards God;  
no will to be or become or obtain anything for ourselves.  
We must exit only to make place for him,  
The highest inmost place,  
Where he may do his work;  
There, when we are no longer putting ourselves in his way,  
He can be born in us.*

*If one would prepare an empty place  
In the depths of the soul  
There can be no doubt that God must fill it at once.  
If there were void on earth  
The heavens would fall to fill it.  
So you must be silent.*

*Then God will be born in you,  
Utter his word in you  
And you shall hear it;  
But be very sure that if you speak  
The word will have to be silent.  
If you go out, he will most surely come in;  
As much as you go out for him  
He will come to you;  
No more, no less.*

*When shall we find and know  
This birth of God within us?  
Only when we concentrate  
all our faculties within us  
and direct them all towards God.  
Then he will be born in us  
And make himself our very own.  
He will give himself to us as our own,  
more completely ours  
than anything we ever called our own.*

*The text says: 'A child is born to us and a son is  
given to us.'  
He is ours  
He is all our own,  
More truly than anything else we own,  
and constantly, ceaselessly, he is born in us.*



## THAT WE MAY BE ONE

NEW



Though this term has not generally been associated with the Christian Tradition, in fact, its essence runs throughout the New Testament, most prominently in the Gospel of John and the Letters of Paul. Opening to the Divine Indwelling through practicing Centering Prayer is the consent to God's presence and action within us. This separate-self sense gradually evolves into the conviction of self in God.

### Six topics are included:

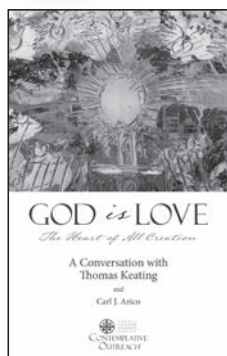
- The Western and Scriptural Models of Spirituality (15 min.);
- The Invitation of the Christian Contemplative Tradition Beyond Rational Consciousness (19 min);
- The Self and Evolving Consciousness (16 min);
- Christian Non-Duality and Unity Consciousness (18 min.);
- The Present Moment and All That Is (13 min.);
- Fallen, Beloved and Surrendered (17 min.)

### Formats:

- DVD package and reflection booklet: \$25 USD
- MP3 (audio only) and reflection booklet PDF : \$10 USD
- MP4 (video) and reflection booklet PDF: \$15 USD

NEW

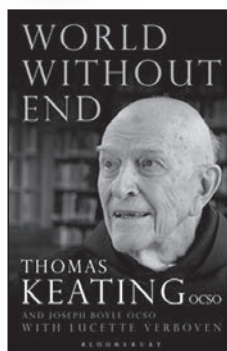
## God is Love: The Heart of All Creation Companion Book



An edited transcript of the DVD series by the same name. In addition, it contains beautiful supporting images and quotations for reflection. The book is a valuable companion to viewing the series, or can serve as a thoughtful reader, independent of the DVD series. It offers a vision of hope and a view of reality that at once integrates the sciences, religion and humankind's place in the cosmos as divine in origin, unifying in purpose, unfolding in its grandeur. 183 pages with color images. \$25 USD; Digital PDF \$13 USD.

NEW

## World Without End with Thomas Keating and Joseph Boyle



In conversations with filmmaker and writer Lucette Verboven, Fr. Thomas Keating looks back on his long life and spiritual development. Fr. Keating now turns his attention to the themes of awakening, the nature of true happiness and the character and purpose of death. This book also contains an interview with Abbot Joseph Boyle of St. Benedict's Monastery where Fr. Keating resides. \$15 USD.

## THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY: FORMATION IN THE CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

Beginning January 2018, this yearlong online program will be offered to provide a foundation for understanding the spiritual journey through the Christian, psychological, evolutionary and existential paradigms. The intention is to provide a globally-accessible program for education, formation and community-building. The program will be based on Thomas Keating's *Spiritual Journey* video series, but will also include more recent videos, written content via email and a synthesis of contemplative voices on the various topics. See the website for more information and registration.



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## INTERNATIONAL

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### **OTHER INTERNATIONAL COUNTRIES**

Please contact  
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[fmquinn48@gmail.com](mailto:fmquinn48@gmail.com)



SAVE THE DATE:  
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PRAYER DAY**  
SATURDAY • MARCH 17, 2018



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A commitment to the practice of Centering Prayer is the primary expression of belonging.

Contemplative Outreach Theological Principle #2

