



Letting Go of the Self-Made Self

THOMAS KEATING



Without thinking or feeling some emotion, there is just awareness. There is then no desire for bliss, enlightenment, or to teach others. Things are just as they are. In that so called emptiness, enjoyment arises of itself. As soon as we try to enjoy, the enjoyment ceases. Somehow at the bottom of emptiness (openness, pure awareness), there is the Divine Presence and the peace that surpasses all understanding.

If you bring the same emptiness and freedom to each moment and its content, you will be happy even in the midst of suffering. Accept everything and everyone just as they are, where they are, and try to act as lovingly as possible in every situation. Be ready to be led you know not where or when. Hush the discriminating mind dividing things into good or evil for me.

Fear draws us to the center we have created, the ego self. Divine Love expands from our real center, the true self.

One feels the pain of others and must reach out to help them even when they are unaware of their pain. But one is content and at peace because one does not discriminate.

The true self is all the colors of the rainbow and must expand to experience the whole of one's being. One is not limited to one or two colors. One need not reject any color, but is to become all of them. The more colors one manifests, the more one manifests the Light that we are and the Light that we share.

Ladders and stages suggest leaving behind the previous rung or stage. Actually one adds new dimensions to what one is, like a tree adds rings.

Take and accept yourself just as you are, where you are. If you are aggressive, lustful, fearful, or shy and withdrawn, notice your feelings before, during, and after each incident, without emotional reactions of blame, shame, anger or discouragement. Let God work with your faults and limitations. Just recognize them and be with them, without trying to correct them. As you watch them, feel them, accept them, their force and exaggeration will gradually diminish.

Keep moving to the center of your being where Divine Love is and welcome whatever bodily feeling or emotion that is happening. The present moment contains all we need to be happy. Only our attitudes have to change. ☸

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A Fruit of the Practice

DENIS SHEEHAN
ADMINISTRATOR

One evening I was on the way to attend my Centering Prayer group when I stopped at a local convenience store to pick up a cup of coffee. This store is known for having little counter support, so the people who tend the registers often hear the frustrations of the people waiting in line.

The lady behind the counter was someone who could be easily dismissed. She was overweight, unkept, and endured one of the most unappreciated jobs on the planet, and it showed.

When it was my turn to pay, I said, "How are you doing today young lady?" and she replied "I'm fine how are you?" Sadly, this is a very typical and robotic response and is the most anticipated interaction of most people in today's social settings. I decided to take this opportunity a bit further by replying "Better now that I got to see you." Her reply stunned me as she said "It has been a long time since anyone has said anything that nice to me, thank you."

At that moment I became aware that many people endure life situations which could be significantly lightened by a simple

word of sincere kindness, and how sad it is that God's creation is so easily dismissed. I don't believe God dismisses anyone, and I pray to be awake enough to refrain from contributing to the tolerated unhappiness of this world.

As I reflected on this interaction later, I realized that of all the things I did that day to contribute to the improvement of God's kingdom, none seemed more important than this moment in time and I believe the lady behind the counter did more for me than I did for her.

This event occurred just a few days after returning from the Contemplative Outreach International Conference where the joy of being in a loving community was fully lived and expressed. The new energy at the conference was electrifying. Several times a day nearly 150 people would gather to share "the silence" and have round table discussions to consider what is next for the organism that is Contemplative Outreach. People literally came from around the world, giving their time and resources in order to be in the company of

others who have been invited to the contemplative dimension of the Gospel. How truly blessed we all are to have found this spiritual home as others endure their day to day lives without experiencing the love of God.

This year I have been challenged and encouraged to recommit to my daily practice of Centering Prayer and other spiritual practices. We can all allow other priorities to get in the way of the prayer, even the Administrator of Contemplative Outreach. When I let my prayer practice lapse, I unfortunately tend to fall asleep spiritually and become unaware of the suffering of the world around me.

So, let me encourage any of you who might have let other priorities get in the way of your twice-daily practice of Centering Prayer to recommit and be present to this ever-suffering world and be God's kind and loving presence to a hurting people. ☸

Peace,
Denis Sheehan
Administrator

What Goes On in The Inner Room?

FR. CARL ARICO AND LESLEE ANNE TERPAY

When you pray, go to your inner room,
close the door
and pray to your Father in secret.
And your Father, who sees in secret,
will cause your life to blossom.

Matthew 6:6

The key Centering Prayer teaching is the four guidelines which are the foundation of our prayer practice. Fr. Thomas' invitation to go back to basics encourages us to explore the value of three supporting elements of the four guidelines: 1) The four R's; 2) the levels of awareness and 3) the psychological experience of the Centering Prayer, sometimes referred to as the moments of the prayer.

Many of us have learned the four R's in the Introduction to Centering Prayer workshop: Resist no thought ... Retain no thought ... React emotionally to no thought ... and Return ever-so-gently to the sacred word. They remind us what to do with our thoughts during the prayer time and when to return ever-so-gently to our sacred word or symbol.

According to Fr. Thomas, four levels of awareness are experienced on the Christian contemplative journey – Ordinary, Spiritual, True Self and the Divine Indwelling. But Fr. Thomas' ideas evolved over time. In 2007 he updated them to five levels on the *Invitation From God* DVD. He named them, "Ordinary, Spiritual, True Self, Ground Unconscious or Ground of Being, and Divine Indwelling or Presence."

Fr. Carl Arico adds Psychological between Ordinary and Spiritual.



The Four Moments of Centering Prayer represent the psychological dynamics over several years of practice but they can also be experienced in a single prayer period. Using Fr. Thomas' words from *Intimacy with God*, those moments are described as such:

First Moment: SACRED WORD – Beginning the prayer (Boats floating down the stream of consciousness)

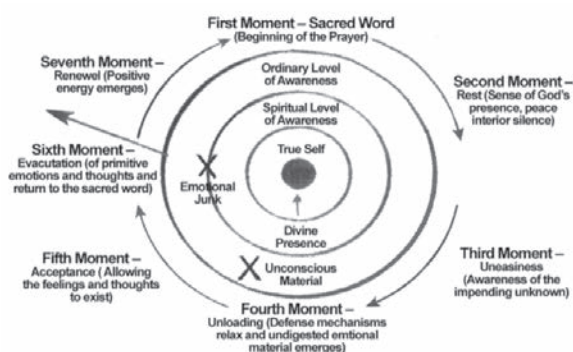
Second Moment: REST – Sense of God's presence, peace and interior silence.

Third Moment: UNLOADING – As a result of the deep rest of body, mind and spirit, defense mechanisms relax and the undigested material of early life emerges from the unconscious at times in the form of a bombardment of thoughts or primitive emotions.

Fourth Moment: EVACUATION – Primitive emotions and thoughts are released as one returns to sacred symbol.

In 2008, Leslee was at a retreat in Westchester, NY called "The Inner Room Retreat" where Fr. Thomas' teaching on the moments of the prayer began to change. Around the same time, Fr. Thomas was also being recorded for the Sounds True program called "Centering Prayer – A Training Course for Opening to the Presence of God." The Sounds True production team was prepared with posters for Fr. Thomas to present the four moments of Centering Prayer. But when Fr. Thomas stood to begin his teaching he said "This diagram is about the seven moments of Centering Prayer. The reason they became seven is because life goes on!"

The Psychological Experience of Centering Prayer The Seven "Moments" of Centering Prayer



The seven moments he introduced in that video are:

First Moment: SACRED WORD

– Beginning the prayer

Second Moment: REST – Sense of God's presence, peace, interior silence

Third Moment: UNEASINESS

– Awareness of the impending unknown

Fourth Moment: UNLOADING

– Defense mechanisms relax and undigested emotional material emerges

Fifth Moment: ACCEPTANCE

– Allowing the feelings and thoughts to exist

Sixth Moment: EVACUATION

– Primitive emotions and thoughts are released as one returns to sacred symbol

Seventh Moment: RENEWAL

– Positive energy emerges

As retreat leaders of both the Intensive Retreat and the Post-Intensive Retreat, when the Seven Moments of Centering Prayer video is shown, we find that many people are surprised that the four moments can also be experienced as seven moments. The fifth moment of acceptance is the one people question the most. Fr. Thomas' teaching on acceptance seems to say that there are times during the prayer that another dynamic comes into play. It is a different experience of consent.

Let's dive a little into moments three, four and five so we can understand what we are accepting as we consent during this prayer. The third moment is when we begin to feel a little uneasiness. It may feel like some material is stuck. We resist seeing what

is emerging. Most pray-ers experience this uneasiness in a very gentle way.

The fourth moment is when one perceives the emotional materials as it arises. Fr. Thomas recommends that we pursue insights about the experience after the prayer time. Thus, what we do during the prayer is FEEL the emotion that is coming to awareness and sit with the emotion.

The fifth moment is what one does with that overwhelming feeling. It is a moment to let go of the feeling and allow it to be evacuated ("drained") by really feeling it without engaging it. Fr. Thomas says "This is NOT the same as returning to the sacred symbol. You can't normally even find the darn thing in this state of mind. It's like a buoy in a hurricane – it's disappeared. It is still there, but it's of no value to you in the moment. You are caught in a downpour and all you can do is let it rain." Acceptance of that feeling is crucial to the evacuation process. If we don't feel and accept the emotion, we'll re-repress some of it in order to escape or avoid the pain. As soon as we experience acceptance in this prayer, the evacuation (moment 6) happens. This consent makes way for the Holy Spirit to rush into that space.

As we sit in this prayer day after day after day, we are living the moments of the prayer. We may begin to manifest the positive energies of faith, hope and love, along with the gifts and fruits of the Spirit as a sign of the freedom of saying Yes to relationship with God, others, ourselves and the cosmos.

It is important to remember that sometimes we experience

all of the seven moments and other times we experience four moments and other times we experience nothing. Sometimes we experience the moments in the prayer time, and other times as we go about our everyday life. Fr. Carl likes to say that at times we are on the local train which has seven moments and other times we are on the express train which has four moments – in both instances the engineer is in charge. All we need to do is get on the train and sit and trust that the engineer will get you to the place you need to go. All in all, each time we sit down to pray, no matter the psychological experience of the prayer time, we are remembering and celebrating our relationship with God and moving inward toward our true self and divine union.

A lot goes on in the inner room, most of which is invisible to us on a sensory and psychological level. ☸

Be still and know that I am God.

Psalms 46:10

Fr. Carl is a founding member of Contemplative Outreach, author of *A Taste of Silence*, and at 85 years old still consenting to God's presence and action and celebrating life. Fr. Carl can be reached at carlja979@gmail.com

Leslee is a retired entrepreneur and now spends her days sharing the Christian contemplative journey, Centering Prayer, and Lectio Divina. She is a Contemplative Outreach commissioned presenter and is part of the service team that defines retreat experiences. Leslee is a spiritual director in Lone Tree, Colorado and a graduate of The Centering for Action and Contemplation Living School. Leslee can be reached at laterpay@comcast.net

Finding Wonders in the Desert

THE MEMBERS OF THE GRACEVILLE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY CENTERING PRAYER GROUP

Few go willingly into the desert. It is a harsh life, more about survival than comfort. The silence can blister like the noonday sun. But harsh does not mean empty, nor does silence mean one is alone. We are people of the prison wilderness, children of the desert of the Real. We are young and old, male and female, slave and free – all connected by the unifying life we find in what is often perceived as a wasteland.

What is it about the prison wilderness that lends itself so well to Centering Prayer? There is something unique found here that is perhaps absent elsewhere. What is this subtle quality that deepens our contemplative practice?

Some believe it is the nature of the environment. One quickly learns who is in control; guards, fences, and rules demonstrate that power belongs to another. We enter the system – we are searched, stripped, and given a uniform. This exposes the illusion, and we see truth: we are not in control of our lives. We never were. Now, our assumptions have been shattered by circumstances. All alleged control was nothing but smoke and mirrors.

For others, it is the monastic quality of prison life that deepens our contemplative practice. We lack many of the usual distractions: no internet or social media, no clubs or events, no bills or obligations. For us, this simplicity of life becomes lovely. One group member says:

“During routine headcounts we are locked in our cells for an hour, several times a day. These are opportunities to practice our prayer and devotions. Some of us endure a more difficult challenge. We must learn to block out the distractions of open-bay dorms shared with 70 other persons. It is an exercise of patience and restraint.”

Another quality present is the abundance of time. A common complaint among those living outside prison walls is that they are too busy to pray. Here, time is a luxury that we have in excess. But the gift of time is a two-edged sword. Some fill it with distractions, ignoring the passing of the hours. Some obsess with the past, trapped by regret. Others become mired in fantasy, the days passing like a sigh while nothing



changes. The press of years will either bring you to yourself or send you screaming from yourself. We have been drawn by the Spirit to resist the urge to run from reality and choose instead to open our minds and hearts for prayerful reflection on the truth and the healing that comes from a deeper intimacy with God.

To complement the first question we can also ask: what is it about Centering Prayer that so suits prisoners? Why does Centering Prayer speak so strongly to those behind bars?

Perhaps the greatest gift of Centering Prayer is that it exposes our true prison, the false self, and reveals to us the human condition. The struggle with the false self is universal, but the plight of the prisoner is darker than most. Many of us have committed great evils, and the lies of the false self are virulent. The capacity for self-condemnation is great when you have done monstrous things. One describes this burning despair:

“I had a very low sense of self-esteem and blamed myself for ending up in prison, for my little brother’s suicide, and for the shattering of my family. I suffered greatly over my brother’s death, having nightmares and terrors from a deep and profound well of guilt.”

Many have similar stories about the wrecked lives they left behind. But what can you pray beyond, “I’m sorry, please forgive me?” We repeat it over and over until the words fail us. We are reduced to silence.

In his book *No Man is an Island*, Thomas Merton explains the success of Centering Prayer for those who walk in such desolation:

“Only the man who has had to face despair is really convinced that he needs mercy. Those who

do not want mercy never seek it. It is better to find God on the threshold of despair than to risk our lives in a complacency that has never felt the need for forgiveness. A life without problems may literally be more hopeless than one that always verges on despair.”

We know this despair better than most. Yet, together we are discovering a path to real peace and freedom. Centering Prayer transmutes our self-loathing into joy and serenity through the power of consent to the Holy Spirit’s presence and action. We are more than the sum of our past experiences. In the classroom of silence, we are taught by the Spirit. God is healing us through the indwelling Spirit as we learn to surrender and to trust the process of becoming who we actually are, of entering into transforming Love without limits. We are joyous from the knowledge that even though our true selves remain shrouded in mystery and often out of reach, God reveals us to ourselves anew each day.

We find in Centering Prayer a great opportunity for healing and growth, as these witnesses share:

“I felt the rage ebbing away, as God wiped it away slowly and surely. It finally dawned one day in Centering Prayer when a little voice said, ‘He is in control. Surrender. He has you.’ ”

“Centering Prayer has slowly persuaded me to be healed by Abba’s love ... Transformation is a long, slow process. The false self was not built overnight, nor will it be dismantled in a day. His love is healing me through the divine Presence, dismantling my false programs for happiness.”

We are separate from society. No longer desired and usually ignored, yet we discover we are not cast off. Instead, God is drawing us, inviting us to join something far greater. We love the fellowship of our group! Together, we have found God and discovered that it was God who was looking for us. We have a place where we belong, a place of unconditional acceptance. The belonging is not because of what we do or what we

bring, but simply because of who we are. Our group rejects no one; all are welcome. This is a first for some of us, a new experience that is counter to a life on the fringes. Such acceptance is transformative, a desert rain that causes everything to bloom riotously. Our eldest member describes it best:

“Centering Prayer answers our desire for community, the oneness with others that springs from a shared vision, shared goals, shared memories, and a shared hope. We could just seek solitude in our cells by reading, thinking, meditating, and praying. But then our desire for community would be unfulfilled. God said it is not good for Adam to be alone; likewise with us. Therefore, our life in the desert is not individual but mutually communal in brotherhood and fellowship, with shared visions and hopes to become the divine beings God created us to be.”

There are a few who, though free, venture into this wilderness by choice. Having volunteers willing to travel these paths alongside us is essential; indeed, prisoners normally cannot gather in groups without a staff member or volunteer present. Our group is blessed to have one such seeker who guides us in our prayer experience. She braves the desert on a weekly basis, putting her faith into action by saying “yes” to sharing the new life she’s been given. Our lives are better for her generous spirit. We are grateful, too, for the other friends who accompany us – those we have met and those we have yet to meet.

Some beauty can only be found in the wilderness – a beauty not easily seen with worldly eyes. Few of us can say that we chose this path; rather, we were led into exile by the One who seeks to free us from the attractions of the world. But, as it says in Hosea 2:14-16, God has led us here to speak tenderly to us, to win us back to Himself. Some of us are new arrivals, others long upon the path laid down by the Spirit’s call. Led by pillars of cloud and of flame, we have all discovered the wonders seen far from the beaten path. ☸

In January of 2017, Chandra Hanson somewhat reluctantly agreed to facilitate a Centering Prayer group at the Graceville Correctional Facility in the Panhandle of Florida, with the support of the chaplaincy staff and much encouragement from Ray Leonardini ([Prison Contemplative Fellowship](#)). The group meets weekly and has ranged from 18 to 35 members. The essential criteria for facilitating a group inside the walls are faithfulness to one’s own daily practice and the willingness to share honestly from that experience. You can contact Chandra at freethroughhcp@gmail.com

Meister Eckhart's Gift to Centering Prayer: The Fifth R

LJ MILONE

Few personages in the history of Christianity have the rare combination of intellectual astuteness, daring rhetoric, radical message, and contemplative insight that the medieval German Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart had. In his day, roughly 1260-1328, Eckhart was a noted academic, an able administrator, a fascinating spiritual guide, and a compelling preacher. He was a mystic in the marketplace, unafraid of engaging the world while plunging into the mystery of God.

Eckhart's message to us is to follow Jesus Christ through the practice of detachment, that we might give birth to the Divine Word within us and break through into oneness with God. Essentially, the mysticism of Meister Eckhart focuses on nothing but God. He invites us to follow Christ into oneness with God by practicing detachment: "God does not ask anything else of you except that you let yourself go and let God be God in you."¹ The Meister wants to center us on God and that means letting go of everything else. This is where he offers Centering Prayer practitioners a wonderful gift.

As a presenter of Centering Prayer, I have noticed that one of the biggest issues people face in Centering Prayer has to do with effort. We are trying too hard. Keating teaches us that Centering Prayer "is an exercise of effortlessness, of letting go; to try is a thought."² So, it is not even that we're trying too hard, it is that we are trying at all! We are, in other words, putting way too much effort into our practice. I often hear people talk about their attempts to push thoughts out of their heads or throw their mental content away. At times, when we sit for a period of Centering Prayer, our bodies reflect this inner effort. Our brows furrow in concentration, our neck and shoulder muscles tighten, and our faces become tense.

In the introductory program to Centering Prayer, we teach the "4 R's": resist no thought, retain no thought, react to no thought, and return to the sacred word. Of course, in practice, we have a tendency to resist, retain, and react to our thoughts. This causes us to *try* to let go, to shove thinking out of our minds. Meister Eckhart steps in to offer us a precious gift. He beckons us to relax. He preaches a way of relaxing our efforts and our thinking to release ourselves into the mystery of God. I believe Meister Eckhart would recommend adding a fifth R to our current "4 R's," which would be "relax into God."

Meister Eckhart preaches only one contemplative practice: detachment. He writes, "Detachment makes me receptive of nothing but God."³ Detachment is the work we do to remove everything getting between us and God. But this doesn't have to be hard work. It can also be an effortless flowing into the mystery of God. Many Eckhart commentators refer to this aspect of detachment as *gelassenheit*. Instead of the hard-sounding practice of detaching, *gelassenheit* communicates gentleness. Though hard to translate, some scholars have suggested that *gelassenheit* means "release," "loosen," or "let be." The Meister also uses words like "self-abandonment," "flow," and "sinking." Here is an example: "You ought to sink down out of all your your-ness, and flow into his his-ness, and your 'yours' and his 'his' ought to become one 'mine,' so completely that you with him perceive forever his uncreated is-ness, and his nothingness, for which there is no name."⁴ We are invited to sink into the divine is-ness and flow into the divine nothingness without forceful effort or trying.

For Eckhart, *gelassenheit* means the effortlessness of detachment. It is as if Eckhart is telling us to take it easy and be laidback about letting go. One of the images

[1] Fox, Matthew, *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*, Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Company, 1983. Kindle Edition

[2] Keating, Thomas, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, NY: Continuum, 2006, p

[3] *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, Translated by Maurice O'Connell Walshe and Bernard McGinn, NY: Crossroad, 2009, p. 566

[4] Meister Eckhart: *Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, Translated by Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, NY: Paulist, 1981, p. 207

that comes to my mind is dropping luggage after a long trip. It is a relief. One of Eckhart's best images for *gelassenheit* is found in his treatise *On Detachment* where he writes, "The soul ... loses its name and draws God into itself, so that in itself it becomes nothing, as the sun draws the red dawn into itself so that it becomes nothing."⁵ Just as effortlessly, one relaxes into the ever-present mystery of God.

When it comes to our practice of Centering Prayer, Eckhart teaches us to let go of pressure, agitation, and any stress regarding the method. When we relax into God, we don't try at all. We sink into the holy mystery who is always and forever already one with us. Relaxing is a spiritual attitude, one of faith in God and ongoing consent.

Eckhart preaches, "You should love [God] as he is a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image, but as he is a pure, unmixed bright 'One,' separated from all duality; and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of something into nothing."⁶ Here, Eckhart invites us to practice the "Fifth R" or *relaxing into God* by not thinking, not judging, but remaining in a state of nothingness. What do we do with our thinking? Nothing! Instead, we let all our thinking, fade away into nothing. We do not engage them, resist them, retain them, or react to them. When we think our thoughts, we allow non-thinking nothingness. Every time we ever-so-gently return to the word, the ego is softly released. It is gradually reduced to nothing so there's nothing between God and us at all.

Relax into God is a good synonym to Meister Eckhart's "sink down out of something into nothing." Sinking is effortless; the "something" is the effort to make something happen. It is trying to manufacture contemplation. We don't have to get it right, though. We only need to show up and trust in silence. We tend to complicate things. Trying to do the method of Centering Prayer right, better, or perfectly may, in fact, be the trap of perfectionism. We wind up reinforcing the false self and its need to control. Relaxing into God, as a spiritual attitude, dissipates the need to make things the way we think they're supposed to be. We think our Centering Prayer is supposed to be without thoughts and so we go about trying to create

that condition. Instead of the effort to rid our minds of thoughts, we gently return to our sacred symbol and remain relaxed, not talking back even as our thoughts are constantly talking to us.

Eckhart says, "Now put aside 'this' and 'that,' and what remains is nothing but God."⁷ We are gently releasing thoughts and feelings ("this" and "that"), until we awaken to God. In our Centering Prayer, we release the tension of expectations, assumptions, and fixed ideas. Our hearts relax and drop any preconceived notions about how everything should be. We relax into God. Now, heeding the wisdom of Meister Eckhart, the teaching could be, "resist no thought, retain no thought, react to no thought, return to the sacred word, and relax into God." ☸



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[5] Meister Eckhart: *Essential Sermons*, p. 292.

[6] Meister Eckhart: *Essential Sermons*, p. 208.

[7] *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, p. 389.

Contemplative Presence in the Digital Realm

LINDSAY BOYER

In a course I teach on digital media and spiritual practice at General Theological Seminary, my students and I have produced a chart of questions we find helpful as we search for balance in our use of digital media. The first part of the chart focuses on the questions that you would most expect seminary students to be asking about digital media: “Am I using digital media too much? Do I get anxious if I don’t use it? Is it making me feel bad?” We who choose lives of spiritual ministry are often tempted to overuse digital devices in an effort to serve without ceasing.

Conversely, we may shun digital devices in the hope that our abstinence makes us more monk-like, self-disciplined, and spiritual, so the chart also includes a section that asks questions like “Am I not using digital media enough? Am I cut off from others? Disempowered? Am I aware of ways I could be helped by more use of it?” In the center of the chart we ask, “Am I in a balanced place? Am I using digital media in a wholesome, balanced way? Is my use of digital media a path to God? Am I willing to be temporarily destabilized in order to learn something new?”

Many contemplatives have a suspicion of digital encounters and a tendency to think of them as not quite real. One of the definitions of *virtual* is “not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so,” and synonyms for *virtual* are “simulated, artificial, imitation, make-believe.” If we are not in the room with each other, isn’t our contact somehow less real and meaningful? Isn’t it all kind of fake? How can real spiritual community be created using virtual means?

Those of us who engage in spiritual ministries have learned various ways of creating sacred space. We establish a proper ambience for prayer with silence, candles, incense and music. We know how to bring a particular type of attention to spiritual encounters that enables us to hold and protect the space for others as they speak about their inner lives.

Rituals for sanctifying space in churches and meditation centers are often dictated by tradition and may feel like well-worn paths. In those settings it may be clear who is in charge of these sanctifying rituals, whereas in the digital world rituals for creating sacred space are not yet established and their creation may require more boldness and imagination. We may sense the need for this boldness and imagination yet feel that an unnamed *someone else* should be in charge of it. What authority do we have? How would we know what to do?

When we are the ones who sense the need for this shift from the ordinary to the sacred, it sometimes means that we are the ones who are called to figure out how to make the shift and implement it. How do we create and provide sanctifying rituals online?

Meditation Chapel

An interfaith online meditation community



Meditation Chapel support groups of all faith traditions in offering and sharing the contemplative experience through the sacramental use of technology.

You will find many Centering Prayer groups listed on Meditation Chapel that are open to all at any time.

See meditationchapel.org

Contact pamela@coutreach.org if you are interested in facilitating a Centering Prayer group on the Chapel. Formation will be provided.



The free **Contemplative Outreach app for Centering Prayer** is available for iPhones and iPads (iOS 7+) and Android phones. Spanish-language versions are also available.

The Centering Prayer mobile app supports one's daily prayer practice. It includes an adjustable timer, as well as opening and closing prayer options that may be read before and after Centering Prayer.

You can find the app in the iTunes App Store or the Google Play Store.

How do we create a prayer on Facebook that cuts through the clutter of the newsfeed and can be experienced as a sacred moment? Can we create online groups that allow our communities greater access to contemplative prayer and sabbath time? Can we create guidelines that will help online groups maintain civil, prayerful discourse?

Conversely, we might ask ourselves how technology can help us to create sacred space in new ways in traditional situations. Perhaps we might use Contemplative Outreach's Centering Prayer app to time periods of talking in a spiritual sharing situation and gently keep participants from taking more than their share of the speaking time. We might host an encounter online that usually takes place in person. For example, when participants would otherwise would not be able to attend a *Lectio Divina* session, it can now can easily and effectively be held by teleconference. During Hurricane Sandy when our church was closed I led our weekly Centering Prayer group by video conference, a grounding opportunity for prayer during a crisis. At a recent meeting of spiritual directors, a regular participant who could not attend was able to participate from afar when one of the group placed a cellphone on speaker mode in the center of our table.

Spiritual direction can also be offered by video very effectively to people all over the world, including those who are geographically isolated or physically challenged and who might not otherwise be able to connect with like-minded spiritual companions.

I periodically lead a Centering Prayer group on Zoom, a video conference service similar to Skype. My group is similar in many ways to the Centering Prayer groups that meet online through The Meditation Chapel. Those who are willing to try this format are often surprised at how satisfying the experience of meditating in a digital community can be. Those who find digital groups helpful or even preferable include contemplatives who don't have a local group with which to practice; introverts who feel more comfortable meeting from their own homes; groups who want to try contemplative prayer but don't have a leader; those who for health, childcare or other reasons have difficulty leaving their homes; those who for various reasons don't want to be physically seen; and busy people who want to avoid travel time.

One night during our video group, I mentioned how moved I was that we were calling in from such different, far-flung places, making our web of prayer much larger geographically than it would have been if we'd been in the same

room. One participant observed that when radio was invented the word "broadcasting" was taken from agriculture to mean spreading seed across a wide area. This seems like a very apt term for an online Centering Prayer group, since this form of meditation comes from the Christian tradition with its parable of the sower spreading seeds of faith. When we cast the seeds of our faithful practices out over a wide area through the use of digital media we are continuing in this tradition.

When we don't expect anything "real" to happen in the digital realm, it is all the more astonishing when it does. Centering Prayer practitioners sometimes experience a sensation when they are practicing of entering a kind of force field that holds them together in an energetic community. Participants in the video calls have told me that they are surprised to discover that they can feel this sensation just as strongly by video. This sense of energetic interconnectedness does not seem to require geographic proximity but can take place in virtual space.

As we become more comfortable and familiar with the landscape of digital prayer and discover that we can feel each other's presences there in bodily and meaningful ways, it becomes natural for us to want to explore how to be of service in this space. The more real digital encounter becomes to us the more real it will feel to those we serve. ☸

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Diving For Pearls:

Spiritual Direction of Contemplatives

FR. DANIEL RENAUD, OMI

"To receive spiritual direction is to recognize that God does not solve our problems or answer all our questions, but leads us closer to the mystery of our existence where all questions cease."

Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*



Spiritual direction is a unique way to grow in faith. The need for spiritual guidance is on the rise in many Christian denominations. In Eastern meditation and contemplative traditions, having a mentor or teacher is considered a necessity. In the early Christian church, spiritual direction had its origins in the desert fathers and mothers who would receive pilgrims seeking truth and wisdom.

Many people feel a deep hunger for wise spiritual guidance. It is a natural extension of longing and desire in the spiritual life. As Janet K. Ruffing states in her book, "We long for The Holy Mystery itself to possess us" (*Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*). This inner quest spills into a yearning for a person who can act as a mediator for holy possession to fully take root. Spiritual direction intensifies, redirects, motivates, purifies desires and opens new and surprising avenues. It deepens the contemplatives' relationship with God.

The image of pearl divers illustrates well the goal and nature of spiritual direction. Pearl divers dive in pairs, often unencumbered by clothing, and hold their breath to dive deep and seek for the right oysters. The muck transformed in their shell yields the precious jewel. Spiritual direction is diving with another into

conscious and unconscious forces (water), inhaling the Spirit of God through mutual vulnerability (lack of clothing) to find the precious wisdom (pearls). It means rummaging through the day-to-day messiness (muck) of existence transformed from the inside by contemplative prayer (oyster shell).

Choosing A Good Companion for the Journey

Using the word direction can be misleading. It can conjure images of an austere guru who tells their disciples what to do. Spiritual guidance refers to companionship with a person involving dialogue and non-judgmental, non-directive and non-violent listening. It also means that the director is committed to their own practice of contemplative prayer, which does not need to be the same type of contemplative practice as their directees and is hopefully aware of different ways of effectively engaging in contemplative practices.

Good directors have acquired and honed the proper skills and developed their natural ability to journey with others, ideally through certified programs. Spiritual direction programs request that candidates be older than mid-thirties and display maturity, good

judgment, and creativity. However, we must not overvalue method, skills and knowledge. Spiritual directors are people who are passionate about God. They enjoy and are excited about the human journey. They commit wholeheartedly to contemplative living. They live out their ministry and practice from a deep sense of vocation; a call discerned through time with humility, self-knowledge and confidence that confer the proper attitudes and aptitudes for direction. Spiritual directors are channels of God's grace; they facilitate its emergence from deep within. They are not a spiritual elite possessing a rare kind of wisdom communicated in cryptic language or unusual prophecies.

With that in mind, I tell people that even the best spiritual director might not be a good fit. Seeking a director is a discernment, which may involve visiting with two or three people before making a longer commitment for direction with anyone. When looking for a director, it is important to trust one's intuition guided by the Spirit of God, who is the only real director. Many people have shared with me that there was an unidentified yet palpable spiritual and human quality to the women

and men they were meeting as directors for the first time. Somehow, they knew they would be excellent companions for their journey.

Two Fundamentals of Spiritual Direction

Contemplative living in response to God's call is a radical choice. It focuses on silence, solitude and stillness in a world that overvalues activity, productivity, ideological posturing, mindless distractions, aggressive dualisms and unbridled consumerism. For this reason, I propose two basic orientations for the spiritual direction of contemplatives: developing resilience and living non-violently.

DEVELOPING RESILIENCE: Resiliency is an umbrella term used in a multitude of domains with an emphasis on how systems and people operate at optimum capacity in a state of fluidity, change and even chaos. It is about how individuals and collectivities have the innate ability to bounce back from adversity, challenges and tragedies. It is a complex capacity

for synthesizing day-to-day experiences on the sociological, psychological, anthropological, spiritual, and ecological levels with a positive stance. Contemplative living helps us tap into conscious and unconscious forces that open our hearts, minds, and souls. It frees us from our acquired patterns of security, affirmation and control as we reconnect to the Divine Indwelling, our true source of life and equanimity.

For this reason, the spiritual direction of contemplatives becomes a space of empowerment for and essential exploring of the forces and energies that enhance resilience. Developing a rich tapestry of social interactions, positive self-regard, cognitive and emotional flexibility, and framing trials within a larger spiritual and religious story are all factors that mobilize resilience. It means knowing one can live rooted and grounded in the reality of God's presence and action, while living life as it is without resorting to placating, evading or numbing pain and suffering.

Directors do not attempt to save others from their pain because surmounting challenges and facing our deepest fears offers a wisdom that is unavailable through any other means. Developing resilience generates hope; it sustains the belief that good is stronger than evil for both the director and directee.

LIVING NON-VIOLENTLY: Many years ago, Diarmuid O'Murchu in his book on consecrated life *Poverty, Celibacy and Obedience* (1999) called for a radical option for life. He explains how the Eastern divine attribute of non-violence, *ahimsa* in Sanskrit (literally noninjury) help us envisage a new way of relating beyond different types of violence. He speaks of the violence of patriarchy, consumerism, and sexual subversion, i.e., sexual repression or aggression. It is a call to see ourselves through the prism of relatedness as we interact with both human and non-human life forms, living the values of dignity, respect, asceticism, humility and cooperation. It consists of reviewing all interactions with compassion and kindness, including one's self. It is also done by not splitting reality into dualistic categories and perceptions that result in injustice, deprivation, and injury to the planet. Participating in spiritual direction with contemplatives is holistic: it fosters the interconnectedness of all things—body, mind, spirit and creation. Non-violent living is a fruit of dedicated contemplative practice, which fosters gratitude for the gift of all things coming from God.

This gratitude includes celebrating the beauty and mystery of spiritual direction as a trinitarian relationship positively affecting and transforming both the director and directee. ☸



Fr. Daniel Renaud, OMI is a priest, religious and itinerant preacher with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate of the US province. Mentored by Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, Fr. Renaud ministers from the campus of the Oblate School of Theology (OST) in San Antonio, Texas. Fr. Daniel has degrees and training in drama education, theology, pastoral ministry, and psychodrama.

He is a Certified Spiritual Director from Creighton University and a member of Spiritual Directors International. Fr. Renaud has preached retreats to priests, religious and lay people on desire and spiritual intimacy, Ignatian spirituality, ecological conversion, and spiritual recovery.

Fr. Renaud is adjunct faculty at OST, and is its chief blog writer. His areas of interest are resilience, fulfilling our vocation, spiritual healing of traumatic relationships, contemplative practices and mysticism



God's Pilgrimage

O God, in this season of darkness and shadow,
When our Greater Light is slow to rise and shadows quick to fall,
May we, like Magi, pilgrim toward an inner epiphany of Christ
 carrying the gifts of an open heart,
 a welcoming heart,
 a consenting heart –
To you, O God, whose heart is restless until you rest in us.

Overshadow us now with the same Spirit that hovered over Mary
 by whose consent you poured yourself into Creation;
 a self-emptying which human minds could not imagine nor hearts conceive.

Pray we then, in the silence of your Word-Made-Flesh,
 we may conceive in ourselves the inconceivable.
That we may, with Mary, offer our “yes,” our “fiat,”
 that we may never cease to birth Christ in the world;
 never cease to embody Christ ourselves, as words-made-flesh.

Break upon the muck of human history in the Bethlehem of our own hearts.
 Where amidst our doubt and fears
 we may discover again the breaking of a new dawn.
Where we may discover again eternity birthed in time,
 and hope born in the most unexpected of places!

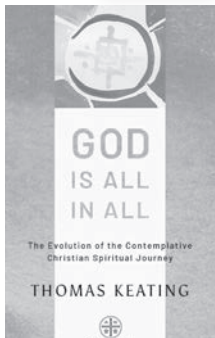
For Alas! A new dawn breaks upon us – indeed *within* us!
 Not with the ferocity of a divine warrior
 but with the vulnerability of an infant messiah;
In whom we discover at last our pilgrimage to God,
 is but God's pilgrimage into every living soul.

The Rev. Vincent Pizzuto, PhD.

Oct 24, 2019

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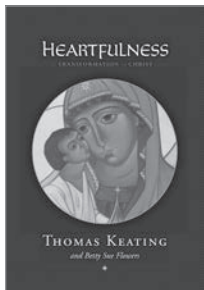


God is All in All is an edited transcript of a keynote talk that Fr. Thomas gave at the 2012 Annual Conference of Contemplative Outreach in Snowmass, Colorado. In July of 2018, from his place of transition at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, Fr. Thomas gave his permission for the editors to edit and publish his talk in book form and digital format.

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Centering Prayer as Purification, Illumination, Union:

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Centering Prayer as a Way of Life:

This course explores how the practice of Centering Prayer evolves into a surrendered life of inner peace and equanimity despite the busy and often tumultuous circumstances of daily life in the 21st century.



SAVE THE DATE:

United in Prayer Day

**Saturday,
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