



# What is God?

Excerpted from an interview in the beginning of the book, *Reflections on the Unknowable*, by Thomas Keating

**Rick Archer (RA):** *Let me start with the most fundamental question. ... Please define what you understand or experience God to be. What is God?*

**Thomas Keating (TK):** This is a difficult term in interreligious dialogue, because there are as many ideas of God as there are people. “God” was originally used in the Hebrew Bible in distinction to the other local gods of different city states. ... It would be nicer if we had another word for God. But one can avoid getting too metaphysical and just quote the Hebrew Bible, “I am who I am” or “I am that I am” (Exodus 3:14) ...

Thus, the best description of God is “is-ness” without any limit: “I am” without any other pronoun. The Buddhists have done well in establishing an attitude towards the uncreated God as distinct from the God of creation or the creator God. It’s the same God, of course, but God as I will use the term here is simply a label. It is the one I’m used to in my tradition. ... God is everything.

**RA:** *There’s a tussle that’s been going on between science and religion for quite some time. Whenever I look at anything of a scientific nature ... a presentation on astronomy ... or listen to quantum physics, to me I am hearing and seeing God ... Infinite creativity is micromanaging every subatomic particle and yet, at the same time, managing the galaxies.*

**TK:** You have certainly got the right idea as far as a Christian perspective, especially that of the mystics. But, of course, one’s idea of God changes as one’s own consciousness matures and one gives up treating God as a kind of dependency where one may get into codependent attitudes or even demanding attitudes towards God. The main thing is to have a big idea of God – huge! Science, both the infinitesimal aspect of it and the grandiose astronomical aspect of it, are presenting us with a new cosmology that religion has to take into account, especially the Christian tradition. Our scriptures are really based on a view of God that is patriarchal and limited by the culture of the time, and it just doesn’t work anymore. Theology needs a solid cosmology on which to build a theology that will appeal to people of our time.

**RA:** *Would you be comfortable in using the “omni” adjectives for God: omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent? Does that jive with your experience of God or intuitive sense of God?*

**TK:** Yes, but they’re a little too metaphysical ... because God has aspects that are beyond reason. Those aspects don’t reject reason, but reason isn’t enough. For instance, how do you resolve infinite justice and infinite mercy? You don’t on the rational level. It remains a mystery, a contradiction. You have to open your consciousness and transcend the rational concept of God. It’s only in the experience of that transcendent presence that one perceives that God is in everything without being limited to anything. God is as dynamic and expansive as change itself, and that is what is changeless about [God].

The dynamic idea of God that evolutionary cosmology has provided for us (and only in the past fifty years in a convincing way) is a revelation of a higher power in which we are immersed and engulfed, and can never be separated from, because we really have no identity except what has emerged in the evolutionary process. Creation is not a one-time event. It’s always happening, and in a sense, the being of God is always becoming. Becoming what? Becoming everything. Human consciousness is really God experiencing human consciousness. That means that we’re a kind of icon of God, as Bernard Lonergan put it. ☉

I Hold You in My Heart, Companions in Grace ... PG 2

The Spirit Leads Us Onward, Via Zoom PG 4

The Inner Roots and Outer Fruits of Contemplation and Practice PG 6

Still Points in the Unfinished Business of Life PG 8

Lovely?! PG 10

Skillful Means: Reorienting to Centering Prayer PG 11

A Blessing for Absence PG 11

Resources & More PG 14



# I Hold You in My Heart, Companions in Grace ...

MARY ANNE BEST

*I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you,  
Praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you,  
because of your companionship from the first day until now*



**A**s I am writing this article it is a few days after the second anniversary of Abbot Joseph's and Fr. Thomas' deaths and a few days before the Feast of All Saint's Day, the day when we are invited to reflect upon what we owe to all those saints and teachers who have gone before, opened the door, and shown us the way. In life and death, they have released a great deal of luminous energy into our midst. We owe them a great deal for this.

Both Fr. Thomas and Abbot Joseph came to me at pivotal and life-changing moments in my life's journey. First, there was Fr. Thomas. Stepping into a small, newly-formed church in a converted bank building in February 1989, the minister, Tim Cook, said that they would begin to show videos entitled the "Spiritual Journey" by someone named Thomas Keating, one a week. A small inner voice urged me to attend. There on a small television, in a tiny sanctuary on that first evening, the hand of God seemed to reach through the screen and take me by the hair of my head and hold on tightly, never to let go. It was only a few months later, that Fr. Thomas visited this little church in Austin, Texas, which has now grown into a beautiful campus, with a contemplative community of devotion and practice that reaches around the world. Over the years, Fr. Thomas came to visit the community in Austin many times, dedicating the buildings and spaces as they were built. Beyond his revolutionary – yes, I think revolutionary – teachings, he gave us his presence and radiant being.

Photo credit: Michael Begeman



A lost and world-weary woman stepped into that sanctuary so many years ago and emerged on a path that has never ceased to reveal itself in new and always surprising ways – which takes me to the meeting of Abbot Joseph some 15 years later in January 2004. Having just departed from a corporate position and entered full-time in the Episcopal seminary, and desiring to mark this transition in a conscious and prayerful way, Tim Cook suggested that I do a personal retreat at St. Benedict's Monastery, my first visit. It was there that I met Joseph; immediately there was a deep heart connection that only grew in time and remains so today. It was shortly after this retreat that I was asked to speak to the board of trustees of Contemplative Outreach on the subject of fund-raising during a board meeting in Austin. And, shall I say, the rest is history? From fund-raising and the formation of the Circle of Friends, to financial administration, to the privilege of working with the Special Projects Committee to publish new works by Fr. Thomas, to online courses, to staffing Centering Prayer retreats – one thing unfolded to another. None were planned; none anticipated. The Holy Spirit nudged; the response was Yes.

Now, the Spirit has nudged and prompted me to depart the employ of Contemplative Outreach, though practicing Centering Prayer and the work of fostering the contemplative life unfolds anew and still.

There are no words to express my deep gratitude for so much and so many beloved companions in grace, though I will single-out especially the gift of working with members of the Circle of Friends who individually will remain in my heart. And I am especially grateful for Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler, Fr. Carl Arico and Pamela Begeman, and, in these last few years, Carolyn Goddard and our joyful partnership for Word of the Week. You beloveds have changed my life and I love you.

I see Centering Prayer and Contemplative Outreach at the threshold of new global possibilities to open minds and hearts, one-by-one. I look forward to beholding this flourishing in our midst. ☸

*I am confident of this, that the one began a good work in you will continue to complete it. It is right I should think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, you who are all companions with me in grace. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ. And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and being, to discern what is of value, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God.*

CF PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

*Gloria En Excelsius Deo!*



For many years, **Mary Anne Best** served as finance and development director of Contemplative Outreach, Ltd. overseeing the stewardship of financial resources and fundraising to support programs and offerings. She was part of the team that formed the Circle of Friends and has joyfully stewarded this program since its beginning. Mary Anne also coordinated the works of the Special Projects Committee, serving as an editor and production coordinator of new works of Fr. Thomas Keating. She has been a principal writer for the online courses and the Contemplative Life Program (CLP). She is a member and trustee of The Church of Conscious Harmony, a contemplative Christian community in Austin, Texas and serves as Abbess of its Journey School and Oblate program. She is a mother and grandmother of two beloved grandchildren; and enjoys the silence, walking, yoga, nature, and travel with beloveds to faraway places.

# The Spirit Leads Us Onward, Via Zoom

LINDSAY BOYER

When I was invited to write an article about Zoom fatigue, I set out to interview some of the many who have been attending Centering Prayer groups on Zoom, one of whom asked me this wonderful question: “Is it cheating if I do ALL my Centering Prayer in online groups?”

My interviews suggest that the main story is not Zoom fatigue but an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the new technologies that make it possible for us to pray together in the amazing multitude of Zoom groups that have sprung up. While some of us are longing to return to our in-person groups, others are saying, “Please don't ever end this online group!” and “I hope things never go back.”

Zoom fatigue is a term that has been created to describe the exhaustion that some feel from attending too many online meetings during the pandemic era. It can be very demanding to follow a conversation when we can't read body language in our usual ways and are interrupted by blips and delays. Latency issues change the rhythms of how we talk back and forth. Add to that the weirdness of seeing our own faces as we speak and the need to master the ever-changing controls on our various devices—there is a lot to negotiate! But do the factors that create Zoom fatigue apply to contemplative groups? We are not involved in crosstalk. We are not struggling to read each other's body language in the way we might be if

we were in a business meeting. We spend much of our time on mute and some of us turn our cameras off, especially during the meditation. Sometimes we have our eyes closed while others are speaking or even while we ourselves speak. For much of our time together we allow ourselves to go within rather than struggling to make ourselves heard or to take in information. For those of us who experience Zoom fatigue in other areas of our lives, our contemplative Zoom encounters may be an antidote rather than part of the problem.

Meditation Chapel now has over 100 facilitators, over 140 groups, and continues to attract new participants. Busy people can use time zone differences to squeeze in a group early in the morning, late in the evening, or even in the middle of the night. Quite a few people join online groups every day and some do virtually all their daily Centering Prayer sessions there rather than alone, an option previously available to almost no one. People love not having to drive at night or travel at all. They love seeing each other's cats, dogs, partners, babies, decor, and window views. While some may have quibbles about the details of group format, for the most part these represent the same kinds of differing preferences that participants also have regarding in-person groups: do we enter on mute, or start with a little chat? How much sharing do we do, as opposed to spending most of our time together in silence?

At the beginning of the pandemic

I met with Pamela Begeman, on staff with Contemplative Outreach, Ltd. and on the steering committee of Meditation Chapel, to brainstorm together about how to help Centering Prayer groups get started as quickly as possible on Zoom. Recently we checked in again to exchange notes on where the events of the last eight months have taken the Centering Prayer community and where the Spirit might be leading us next. Pamela expressed her excitement about the way the movement into online groups has led us “beyond mythic membership consciousness.” On Meditation Chapel, there is no longer a sense that “I go to my church and meet with my prayer group.” We're in an environment where we don't get to pick who our group is, we just show up, and “that has interesting effect on consciousness, the fruits of which will show up down the road.” Sometimes we don't even know what part of the globe our fellow group members are from. As we join from different time zones we exist almost beyond time. There is something very egalitarian about our images in their little boxes of equal size and random order. While we may lose something by not knowing each other in familiar and localized ways, we gain something in our sense of ourselves and each other as equal partners in a global community of prayer. The seemingly random assortment of people who come together for prayer prevent us from over-identifying with the group and underline that we have been brought together by divine providence.

Pamela and I identified what we see as emerging trends. While online quiet days and shorter retreats have become more commonplace, there is a hunger for longer online retreats. Some communities are experimenting with five to eight day retreats in which participants are not on Zoom all day long but spend some time in silence in their homes, punctuated by times of coming together on Zoom for talks and practice.

Now that many people have more opportunities for practice and greater access to groups, their committed contemplative practice is taking them deeper, and many of them are hungry for increased spiritual sharing to help them process their experience and insights, yet they aren't always looking to do that within the Centering Prayer groups themselves. One group has developed a pilot program of offering group spiritual direction to some of its members. What other opportunities might online groups offer their participants to help them bond together and deepen their sense of online community, all the while protecting the sacred space of contemplative prayer time?

Local Contemplative Outreach chapters have new discernment issues to explore. The whole idea of a "local" chapter is becoming

obsolete. What does local mean in this new context? What do we put in our "local" newsletters when we have access to international events but not enough time and space to publicize all of them? It's time to rethink everything, which can be both exciting and bewildering. Perhaps chapters that once were local will rearrange themselves around themes that call specifically to them and the competencies of their memberships rather than their geography. It's all being reordered, and our contemplative practices can help open our hearts and minds to the extraordinary possibilities that lie before us. Many local chapters are in discernment about whether to go beyond the one hundred person threshold of a regular Zoom account: "Okay, I can kind of wrap my head around one hundred people, but am I ready to be the facilitator of an event that might reach five hundred?"

While contemplative groups don't have large financial resources to promote the practices that are so dear to them, events and technologies have suddenly given them new power and reach. Contemplative Outreach service teams are seeing that their offerings can appeal to vast new audiences. The Centering Prayer Introductory Team recently reached more than 400 people with an introductory workshop, while the 12-Step

Outreach team had more than 800 registered for a weekend retreat. Small groups may sometimes even be nervous about how many people their events attract, and wonder if they need to set cut-off points.

Rather than being fatigued by Zoom, we can be energized by the new ways our contemplative practices equip us to approach this unique situation. While the pandemic has created many hardships, losses, and challenges, our odd and wonderful new online communities have helped us nurture spiritual resources that we can offer to our anxious and disrupted world. Our practices allow us to cultivate an openness to the movement of the Spirit that enables us to follow the twists and turns of this adventure we are on. As Pamela observed, "You start to see how the mind has constraints you didn't even know it had and you're being asked to blow through all of them all at once."

Let's use our beloved contemplative practices to break down our own barriers and resistances to what is suddenly and astonishingly possible. The Spirit flows forth like water that will go wherever there's a channel open for it. It has taken us to surprising places and it is not done with us yet. May we continue to follow its exciting, creative, and holy movement. ☸



**Lindsay Boyer** is a spiritual director specializing in working with those who are uncomfortable with institutional religion; She is Contemplative Outreach coordinator for Brooklyn New York, and an adjunct professor at General Theological Seminary, where she teaches about digital spiritual practice. She is also the author of *Centering Prayer for Everyone*, published by Cascade in May 2020.



# The Inner Roots and Outer Fruits of Contemplation and Practice

KEITH KRISTICH

Is contemplation an end in itself? Is the formal act of sitting, closing our eyes and practicing Centering Prayer an end in itself? Although every person knows in a unique way the intimate fruits of a centered mind and open heart during the interior silence of contemplation, I sense now more than ever we need to look for the fruits of contemplation outside the practice.

Of course, this is not new knowledge: Fr. Thomas Keating was clear about not seeking the fruits of contemplation *inside* the practice but in our everyday lives. What good then is this inward-facing path of Centering Prayer?

From the earliest days of my practice, Centering Prayer has been a way of watering the roots of my inner being. By slowing down, being still, and surrendering into silence, I open myself to what remains untouched by my busy, ever-changing mind. In contemplation, I find the stillpoint of the ever-rolling wheel of the world and encounter what is Changeless in my ever-changing emotions. Thus, Centering Prayer is an *inner practice*, aimed at inner change, grounded in interior silence.

This interior practice results in real world change. The words of Confucius come to mind: “Cultivate the root; the leaves and branches will take care of themselves.” Contemplation is about tending to my inner life with God, waking me up to my pre-existing union with the

All in all. By cultivating my interior roots, I learn to trust that the Divine will take care of the rest.

## **A Two-Fold Path: Contemplation and True Self**

Centering Prayer is a two-fold path, an invitation into the gift of contemplation and a process of Divine Therapy – uncovering the True Self buried beneath the “mind-made-me.”

In contemplation we approach God as the Ground of Being by letting go and opening to God who is within ourselves as the very Source of our inner life and the *Beingness of our being*. In contemplation we come to know that God does not exist like an object but rather that God is the Ultimate Subject of all that is, the Source out of Whom all things emerge. Contemplation then is about learning to rest in God as the deeper Subject of ourselves. As Elizabeth of the Trinity said, “*My only ‘me’ is God.*”

By resting in Being, I am able to rest my busy mind, the chaotic emotions, and go into the stillness of my body. By resting in Being, I touch base with the deepest parts of myself.

Centering Prayer also is making greater contact with our deeper True Self. This is not the healthy and healed ego, our integrated Enneagram type, nor the various roles we play in life. In making contact with the True Self, we touch that part of ourselves that lies beyond description, beyond the mind's

ability to grasp, just as the Divine is revealed most ultimately as a Loving Mystery. We too are a mystery unto ourselves. By sinking into this mystery and embracing it (or being embraced by it), we gradually learn to live *from* it in our daily life.

By consenting to the presence and action of God within me, I experience the transformative power of this consent. The shift of Centering Prayer is from a self-centered-me to a centered-self. The whole fortress of the self-made-self, created in the programs for happiness and group membership, is slowly softened through regular surrender. We then live with far more interior freedom.

It is from this freedom that we must learn to live in everyday life.

## **Bearing Fruits From our Roots**

Contemplation, though it usually begins with eyes closed watering the hidden roots of our inner life, must never end there. As Meister Eckhart said, “*What we plant in the soil of contemplation, we shall reap in the harvest of action.*”

Contemplation flows naturally from within and is seen in the outside world in the love between a mother and son, in the life of service between a nurse and patient, between the politically engaged and their apparent political enemy. A practice that waters the roots of our inner being ends up bearing fruit in all of our life.

Questions emerge about my own practice like, “Am I more open minded as a result of my meditation?”, “Do I truly love those nearest to me?”, “Am I better able to love my perceived enemies as a result of my Centering Prayer practice?” My hope and experience is that in making contact with my True Self, I become a more open, loving, and compassionate person – for how can I rest in the Source of Love during contemplation and not become more loving?

Therefore, dedication to the contemplative life manifests as a transformed life, inside and out. Through the nondual, contemplative mind we know the extraordinary is inextricably bound up and entangled in the ordinary. God is no further from us than we are from ourselves. Our job is to walk this awareness every day.

### **God is in the Pots and the Pans**

Now more than ever we need to hear and honor the invitation of Christ to bring the “Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). And indeed, we all do this in many ways. This is the fruit of our practice, bringing the way of God into the way of the world. It is the recognition, as Teresa of Avila suggests, that God “walks among the pots and pans.”

Honoring Teresa’s experience, we carry our contemplation from

the prayer mat into the kitchen and even into the marketplace. Centering Prayer is good at “centering” us- but once the contemplative mind and awareness is cultivated and matured, it is time to move from our centered-self, into the world of “pots and pans.” The centered-self — whose roots are nourished in our daily silence and stillness — is able to *move effortlessly* from roots to fruits, offering our Self to a world in great need.

From this centered-Self and transformed sense of being, we are better able to enter the world of action. Not only in the kitchen, but also in the streets. Even activism, whether political, social, environmental or racial, needs to come from this higher, healed, and transformed self to bear good fruits. We can act from the centered-self, the part of us that is grounded and in the Divine Flow. We need to come from the contemplative mind, not demonizing our enemies, but learning to listen to and love them without giving in to false understandings.

### **Beyond the Pots and Pans**

We live in an unprecedented age of a global pandemic, political division, a climate crisis experienced through hurricanes and wildfires, racial injustices in the US and beyond, gender and income inequalities, to

name a few. We need to embody our contemplative spirit to act and bring healing and wholeness to the world, to bring “the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.”

As contemplatives, we trust that we can act from our True Self. The world needs it. Working from the contemplative, nondual mind means that we don’t perceive things in “us vs them” mentalities. The contemplative mind can walk the way without many hang-ups of the false self and groupthink, allowing us to act in alignment with God, rather than according to our own ego agendas. Our action will be that much more powerful because it is in the greater Flow of God.

I invite you as a fellow Centering Prayer-er to continue and deepen your practice, for yourself but also for the world. It can be easy to find excuses not to practice but let’s remember the sage advice of St. Francis de Sales, “Half an hour’s meditation each day is essential, except when you are busy. Then a full hour is needed.”

Bridge the gap between practice and everyday life. Integrate the contemplative and active life, for just as there is no legitimate separation between the inner roots of a tree and its outer branches, there ought to be no separation between our contemplation and our everyday, ordinary, pots-and-pans life. ☸



**Keith Kristich** is a commissioned presenter of Centering Prayer as well as a certified teacher of meditation and the Enneagram. Keith works with people in small group, retreat, and one-on-one settings, helping people slow down and reconnect with their deep self. You can find more about Keith's work at [www.keithkristich.com/](http://www.keithkristich.com/)

# Still Points in the Unfinished Business of Life

JULIE ANN STEVENS

A blank canvas holds endless possibilities. And this, as one might envision, is both extremely attractive — and terrifying.

Believing I am in control of which one of these possibilities will materialize — along with the ability to make it conform to what I think it should be — pushes fear out of the way and lures me into picking up the brush every time.

In practice, my vision always eludes me and I pursue it — fervently — while God patiently allows me this time of wrestling with the ragged edges of my heart.

Each time the process starts, I think “I’m really going to get there this time.”

When the painting eventually comes to rest, I realize there was nowhere to get to — the present moment in the immediacy of this brush stroke, this step back, this gaze upon and within, is God coming through me as this painting.

If this pattern resonates with practitioners of Centering Prayer, it’s because my creative process and my prayer practice have been evolving together since 2010.

Along the way, I noticed many aspects of Centering Prayer leading the way in my artwork, especially how the gentle presence of God flows over my harsh inner critic, allowing new possibilities to emerge. I am now aware of four distinct stages in the creation of a painting that came from and are nurtured by my prayer practice.

## **One: To be Overtaken**

The intention to start a painting is sparked by an experience of beauty that grasps me — one that is fleeting in linear time — and unmistakably eternal in deep time. Contemplative teacher and healer James Finley refers to this as a moment of “spontaneous contemplative awakening”.

In his words: “There is an intuition that in this instant you are glimpsing the true nature of the one unending moment in which our lives unfold. Our heart is quickened and we know that this moment is true.”

When I encounter a moment like this, it doggedly imprints itself in my heart and mind and then shows up in my journal and sketchbook. If I open a book or listen to a podcast, there it is again, translating itself to me, asking me to translate it to the world with my brush.

Over the years, I’ve been able to recognize that God is seeking me when beauty holds my attention this particular way. I’ve gradually learned to let go of performing and people pleasing to be overtaken by God and thus move into the next stage of the process.

## **Two: To Merge With**

This is where I discern the initial subject of the painting, which is often grounded in some element of nature.

For example, if fullness and impermanence are themes I intuit, the image of a bloom may become

a concrete starting point to guide the first step in the process which is texturing.

I use molding paste to lay down a baseline vibration. This directs the energy flow on the canvas and is perhaps the only long-term commitment I make to the process. I make this layer more from what I feel, and less from what I am visualizing.

Then comes the selection of the initial color palette. I mostly feel it depending on the light in the room and my mood, but sometimes liturgical symbolism guides this process. In my ongoing devotion to the spirituality of Mary, I often decide to use shades of blue and white or integrate the rose pattern with more fiery hues.

I begin to realize my plans are essentially useless when I lay the first layer of color down.

I may realize that what I perceived as a bloom is now offering itself as another aspect of landscape — perhaps flowing water or windblown prairie. Time and time again, I feel the oneness of all things in “this” thing as I perceive it — be it endless sky, country road, sunset over sea, or fleeting flower petal. All share the same energy and float before me as possibilities.

In this stage, I learn to bear what is simply coming to me now without knowing what it is becoming. I add another layer in faith, allowing the underpainting to inform the next layers and show



through in a dynamic dance. It's very apophatic and takes practice to let God fill in the gaps in unknown and unspeakable ways.

I notice how unremarkable and essential each possibility that arises truly is, just like my breath, and I am also aware of just how much I want to "get it" and get on with it, hoping to bypass the next stage altogether.

### Three: To Lose Sight

I put off leaving my comfort zone and losing sight of the shore for as long as possible, even though I am aware that the paintings that speak deeply to me have this painful passage in common.

Through the pandemic of 2020 that ripped all of us away from our customary reference points, I noticed my resolve to keep this part of the process at bay more than usual.

I heard myself share "I am about to go over the edge" in conversation repeatedly, and I felt keeping myself on this side of that edge was an imperative.

That meant working on concrete, little pieces I could control. I held my sessions close to me, finite and able to finish in an hour or two with a big smiley face.

Then about a week before the Fall Equinox, I remembered a quote that I first heard Richard Rohr make reference to in 2013 as I sat in the gathering of the first cohort of the Living School for

Action & Contemplation.

*God is an intelligible sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere.*

- Hermes Trismegistus

When I sat with this text, it occurred to me that God is over that edge I'm trying to keep myself from going over.

Why am I resisting the chance to taste the infinite Love of my awakening heart's longing?

When I pray "thy will be done" nearly every morning as I awake, do I really mean "my will be done"?

Shortly after the Equinox I worked a 20" x 20" canvas over a few days. When it stopped in an interesting place, I called it "Blooming Edge."

A day later, I turned it on its side and consented to be carried over the edge for another three days.

### Four: To Rest in Wholeness

When I started painting in 2010, I thought of my work as sacramental and reflective of a process of reconciliation. I've come to express this as a "still point" in time when the painting comes to rest in the midst of all the unfinished business of life.

Discerning this "still point" is the most evolved aspect of my artist's heart.

I believe it presents itself several times throughout every process and often I miss it.

And yet, there are unmistakable moments when I immediately know the painting has reached a state where it rests in wholeness. I discern this state as active with the aliveness of a dynamic incarnational being, and quiet with the unchanging presence of the One in Whom all things hold together.

Recognizing this becomes its own moment of spontaneous contemplative awakening.

After "Blooming Edge" was transformed, I called it "Receive" and I wrote:

"This painting had its way with me for days. To refuse it seemed impossible and in continuing, a voice inside criticized me for being obsessive. For not getting it sooner. For being wishing washy. For lacking focus.

"And yet, I was willing to give myself over to this until thy will be done — I think."

I am amazed how this process mysteriously exposes, accepts and reconciles my own wayward heart. It is at once humbling and wonder-filled to experience myself in relationship with God taking a blank canvas with endless possibilities and wrestling into awareness a unique expression of beauty beyond my finite imagination. ☸



**Julie Ann Stevens** is an American contemplative artist living in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her artwork — encompassing visual imagery, written reflections, and guided experiences — has attracted an international audience drawn to its heartfulness, depth, and peace-invoking yet prophetic style. For more information, visit <https://julieannstevens.com>. More of her process can be experienced in her workbook "Into Your Heart: A Creative Path to Healing and Wholeness."

# Lovely?!

RITA WEICK

Each time it's the same: the men file into the chapel, sign in, say hello to Robert and I and find a seat in the circle. Anywhere from 4 to 12 show up for the twice a month Sunday Centering Prayer circle. For months we've been reading and discussing Ray Leonardini's book *Finding God Within* and this time we have something different – multiple copies of the December 2019 edition of "Contemplative Outreach News." Inside is an article entitled, "Finding Wonders in the Desert" written by the members of the Graceville Correctional Facility Centering Prayer Group.

After praying, we dig into the article, going around the circle reading one sentence at a time, hearing the words from multiple voices. We read:

*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.*

And then we stop, for a word in the last paragraph read aloud has stuck in someone's craw: **lovely**. I jot their words (with their permission) as fast as I can for the interchange is lively and intense.

"Prison experience is NOT lovely. Not my reality. We learn in the midst of it. I'm afraid that it WILL become lovely. What's that mean when I leave here? Will I want to come back?"

"There's truth to the simplicity of being here. It's an opportunity to focus on ourselves. We can redefine lovely."

"I created a lot of suffering in life. Being in this moment, I can turn any situation into lovely and rewarding."

And the open and deep discussion continues, line by line, paragraph by paragraph. And before we know it, the hour has passed. Some sigh at the realization and all express deep gratitude for the opportunity to experience the deep silence together. As they file out thanking us, Robert and I with heartfelt honesty tell them how thankful WE are for this time with them. ☸



**Rita Weick** is a retired teacher, Centering Prayer practitioner for 23 years, past coordinator of Contemplative Outreach of Central Oregon, a commissioned presenter of Centering Prayer, a Centering Prayer group facilitator, and current facilitator of twice monthly Centering Prayer/meditation group at Deer Ridge Correctional Institute in Madras, Oregon.



# Skillful Means: Reorienting to Centering Prayer

A. GRACE

*“The Christian spiritual path is based on a deepening trust in God. It is trust that first allows us to take that initial leap in the dark, to encounter God at deeper levels of ourselves. And it is trust that guides the intimate refashioning of our being, the transformation of our pain, woundedness, and unconscious motivation into the person that God intended us to be.”*

Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God*



I awaken to silence in the dark. The air is cold and I wrap the sleeping bag closer around me. The desert floor is hard under the thin sleeping mat. What is this stillness? My body has stopped trembling for the first time in months. The earth takes all of the fear I have been carrying for years. I am no different than the craggy granite mountains rising up like a great wave at the edge of the canyon where I've pitched my tent. What time is it? I fumble to find the zippered door to my insulated moonpalace tent and unzip it, crawling out of the portal like a clumsy creature emerging from her space capsule. The sky is barely alight in pink dawn. I stand and gaze around in wonder at this landscape that looks like a new planet. There is fluttering in a nearby manzanillo bush. Curiosity pulls me closer. Woven in the branches is a nest. Wonder arises. A rooster crows somewhere far down the canyon. I

look up. The wave of solid mountain seems to be disintegrating into a spray of diamond light filling the air around me. All of creation holds me, whispering, “All is well and all shall be well.”

A Centering Prayer practice had been a great comfort to me for many years leading up to the point of a total collapse of life as I knew it. Decades of abuse led to being chronically ill, which led to a violent end to a long marriage, which led to homelessness, then intensive trauma therapy, then meditation practice while living in a tent in the desert and in Buddhist monasteries. As I continued to seek refuge in Centering Prayer during this rearrangement of life, I became increasingly agitated, depressed, and lonely. More practice only brought more of the same. I spoke with fellow contemplative friends and they told me they too had similar practice experiences. What was going on? A passionate insistence arose in me that spiritual evolution need not be a continuous leap into a dark night.

Affirmation and transformation came when I found my way to somatic trauma therapy (a body-oriented rather than story-oriented healing method). Later I enrolled in a meditation teacher training, studying neuroscientific perspectives on Buddhist stages of progression in practice which cultivate a healthy intimate knowing of internal and external environments. We can quiet in Centering Prayer practice through preparation practices inspired by

somatic therapy and meditation for the nervous system, learning the common sequencing of how our minds and bodies expand into awakening, and reconnecting with nature around us as a safe support for the nature within us. We may still experience darkness, excitement, and wonder in our practice using these skills, but these experiences become orienting rather than disorienting. Uniting with God in the great cosmos requires no less preparation than what is required for our earthly relationships. We develop these skills so that our bodies and minds build the internal monastery that supports being in this world but not of it.

After years of healing therapy and oceans of grace, my life and body are significantly calmer, but even “householder life” in complicated times brings yearning for desert time when the sweet cooing of morning doves and the starry swath of the Milky Way were my only timekeepers and all the space in between was free from time. Yearnings can be the call to sink into the *Lectio Divina* of body opening to earth, finding peace on this horizontal earthly plain before ascending beyond ourselves to live as Christ now. It is time to discover the innate resilience within our own being as a home where release, rest and creativity blooms into communion with God.

Life in this world has always been full of challenges and traumas that can make us forget that we are always in God. David Treleaven,



trauma expert and author of *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing*, writes “From witnessing or experiencing violence, to losing a loved one, to being targeted by oppression, people can experience trauma in a variety of ways.” I would venture to say that no one is spared experiencing trauma in a lifetime. Even if life is calm, the unloading process initiated during Centering Prayer can become unnecessarily chaotic when silence and stillness meets an unprepared nervous system, causing dramatic pendulation between shutdown -- what can look like sleepiness, visions or resistance to engaging with life -- and chaos -- which might result in perfectionism, procrastination, restlessness, and overindulging in anything from work, substances, or even spiritual study and practice. Any of these symptoms may indicate a need to examine the intensity of practice and make appropriate adjustments.

Thankfully, modern science has given us proof of extraordinary potential for brain plasticity and nervous system resilience -- our bodies are indeed built for forgiveness and grace, and we can navigate our way back to the shore of freedom with a little help from proven therapeutic modalities. Progressive trauma therapists teach us one way to tap into this potential: to recognize our thresholds for intensity by noting pleasantness. Learning to do this gives us capacity to discern between wholesome spiritual opening and cathartic overload. Making contact with God’s presence and action within us can initially bring heightened emotional arousal and out-of-body experiences leading to mystical insights that

one is not yet equipped to integrate. Becoming empowered to discern what adjustments to make within our spiritual practice grows our self-compassion which leads to joyful ease, qualities crucial to rest in the finest density of silence.

Let’s play with a couple of simple preparatory practices. I call these the “Nest and Rest” practices. Approach these practices as *Lectio Divina* with your own body and mind. Listen and see with the heart the external environment that helps your internal environment relax into the cave of the heart.

In the Nest practice we are discovering a threshold for pleasantness through the bodily experience of self-regulation. First, find a place to sit where it feels safe to be still. With eyes open, take one hand and make a fist; it doesn’t have to be tight or loose, just whatever feels appropriate for the moment. You can also do this with a foot or tighten a particular muscle in your arm or leg. Just notice what this feels like for a few seconds. Then with your other hand or foot relaxed, bring the tightened part of you to rest in this nest of the relaxed part of you. Take a few seconds to feel into this, to notice if anything shifts within you, notice if the breath changes or if there is a sense of relief or support. This may take repeated practice initially to notice a shift. If this was something that you found calming, you may take a few moments periodically during your day to re-engage with this and remain with that sense of release for a breath or two.

To expand the Rest game of experiencing your body’s wisdom of automatic regulation to healthy thresholds, go for an exploratory

stroll in nature. Pause in a comfortable place and take up your Nest posture. Let your eyes remain open but allow them to relax. It helps to think of the backs of your eyes releasing back into your skull. Now, without intending any specific direction, allow your vision to land where it feels easy. Notice very generally color, texture, or shape only for a minute or so, then go back to your stroll. You may experiment with bringing this orienting to external pleasantness into various moments of your daily life. For example, as I write this article, I notice I am a bit tense, realizing once again I have underestimated how much time it takes for me to write something. My posture is collapsed, my neck craning forward towards the computer screen as if I’m both hunting and hunted. My breath has become short and shallow. I realize I need a break. I orient to the room I’m in with my hands in Nest posture and decide to go outside for fresh air. I stand in the driveway noticing with wonder the blue sky and then my vision falls on a sage bush nearby. My body softens as I look at the soft leaves and my breath expands again. In just a few minutes I am restored enough to return to writing with more awareness and creativity.

After some days or weeks experimenting with these practices outside of Centering Prayer, begin to experiment with them within your prayer. When you notice the mind bringing up distracting memories, sleepiness or anxiety, return to your sacred word and your nest posture. Give yourself permission to open your eyes and allow them to land on something in the space that is pleasant. Notice if your body needs to shift slightly.

When your entire being feels more present, return to Centering Prayer. You will eventually notice the mind and body autoregulating before becoming stressed. Welcome and celebrate this. This too is God intimately refashioning you as you are intended to be. These two simple practices are just the beginning of what is possible in preparing to encounter God at deeper levels of ourselves.

After months spent living in the desert in my magical moonpalace tent, it was time to head home. I was sad to go. Despite this time in my life having contained some of the most difficult lessons, it also contained the most miraculously formative experiences. After I packed up my car and began the long drive back, this comforting wisdom came to me, "You can never come back from the desert." In this moment I understood that the person who arrived in the desert months ago had been so radically transformed that there was a new person returning home and life would never be the same again. May this writing assist in discovering and trusting your transformed being to live new life. ☸

**A. Grace:** I spent most of my life outside playing in nature working as an equestrian coach and competitor. In 2014 a deep heart-opening experience sitting with a herd of horses sent me back to church after avoiding it my entire adult life. One day after a service at an Episcopal church, I wandered into what I thought was a coat closet but was actually where several people were gathered learning about Centering Prayer. I recognized this prayer as what the horses had been teaching me about living without story to embody powerful presence moment by moment. I was thrilled that there was a way to practice this with my human herd. I have been practicing ever since. I am now certified in trauma-sensitive mindfulness coaching with trauma expert, David Treleaven. It is my wish to share this "best practices" approach in the sanctuary of nature for contemplative practitioners, so they avoid the potential pitfalls of the Centering Prayer practice and more fully live its powerful benefits. I am also an oblate of a non-denominational contemplative Christian community.

## ***A Blessing for Absence***

May you know that absence is alive  
with hidden presence,  
that nothing is ever lost or forgotten.

May the absences in your life  
grow full of eternal echo.

May you sense around you the secret  
Elsewhere, where the presences  
that have left you dwell..

May you be generous  
in your embrace of loss.

May the sore well of grief turn into  
a seamless flow of presence.

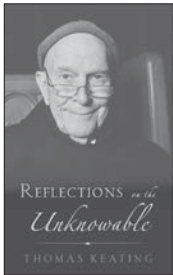
May you be embraced by God  
in whom dawn and twilight are one -  
within the Great Belonging.

John O'Donohue,  
*To Bless the Space Between Us*



## RESOURCES IN OUR ONLINE STORE

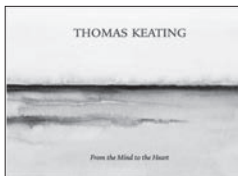
### Reflections on the Unknowable



This is a distillation of over seventy years as a monastic and more than three decades of writing on Centering Prayer, exploring on a wide range of diverse topics.

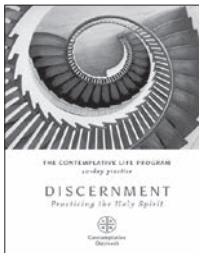
The first part of the book is a lengthy interview with Fr. Thomas in which he examines concepts of the divine available to individuals willing to open the door to God. The second section consists of 31 brief homilies with a wide range of diverse topics including the Trinity, the message of the Epiphany, cultivating interior silence, spiritual poverty and the beauty of chaos. *Book: \$15 USD*

### From the Mind to The Heart



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

### Discernment Praxis: Practicing the Holy Spirit



This new 199-page booklet uses a discernment practice inspired by the teachings and being of Sr. Meg Funk, a long-time Centering Prayer practitioner, teacher, spiritual director and colleague of Fr. Thomas Keating. The booklet reviews the five movements of a contemplative discernment practice and invites participants to use their own real-life questions during this 40-day praxis.

*Book: \$20 USD • Digital download (PDF): \$10 USD*

## ONLINE RESOURCES

 **YouTube** <https://www.youtube.com/coutreach>



### Learn Centering Prayer Three Different Ways:

A global Centering Prayer Introductory Program with follow-up sessions was recorded July 2020 and is now available on our YouTube channel, [youtube.com/coutreach](https://www.youtube.com/coutreach).

► You will find it under the "Playlists" tab on our YouTube channel



Or you may wish to view this recorded Centering Prayer workshop with Fr. Carl Arico, organized by the DC/Maryland Contemplative Outreach Chapter.

► You will find it under the "Playlists" tab on our YouTube channel.



### Centering Prayer online course with Spirituality & Practice: Centering Prayer as Practice and Process

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### IN THE USA CONTACT

Marie Howard  
Coordinator of Volunteers  
tel 973.846.6915 • [MRHfamlife@aol.com](mailto:MRHfamlife@aol.com)



### INTERNATIONAL

#### SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE SPEAKING COUNTRIES

Please contact Extensión Contemplativa at  
[info@extensioncontemplativainternacional.org](mailto:info@extensioncontemplativainternacional.org)

Visit the website at  
[extensioncontemplativainternacional.org](http://extensioncontemplativainternacional.org)



#### FRENCH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

Yvan Cloutier • [cloutiyv@sympatico.ca](mailto:cloutiyv@sympatico.ca)  
Christophe Dupin • [christophedupin@gmail.com](mailto:christophedupin@gmail.com)  
*Supporting international 12-step persons*



#### KOREA

Helen Uhm • [junguhm@yahoo.com](mailto:junguhm@yahoo.com)



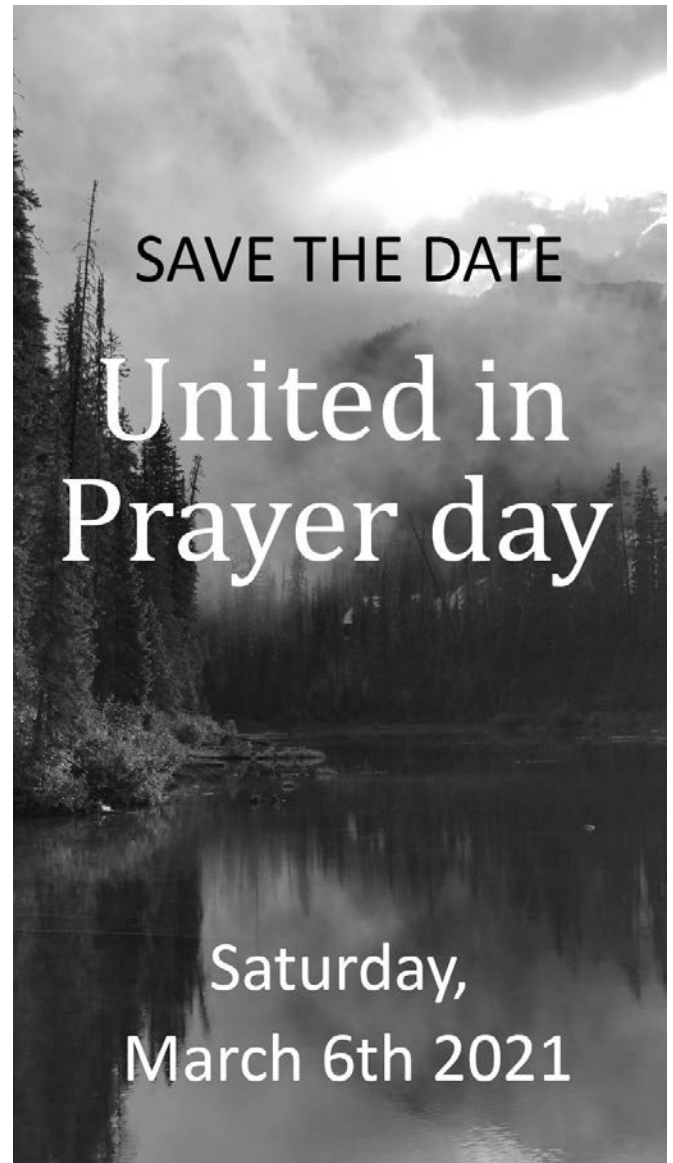
#### POLAND

Fr. Wojciech • [wdrzek@icloud.com](mailto:wdrzek@icloud.com)



#### ENGLISH SPEAKING PERSONS

Elizabeth Norton-Amor • [mnortonamor@worldonline.co.za](mailto:mnortonamor@worldonline.co.za)



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# Contemplative Outreach

1560 Union Valley Rd #909, West Milford, NJ 07480

Tel: 973.838.3384 • Fax: 973.492.5795 • [office@coutreach.org](mailto:office@coutreach.org)

[www.contemplativeoutreach.org](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org)

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Listening to the word of God through the practice of Lectio Divina is encouraged,  
particularly its movement into contemplation which the daily practice of Centering Prayer facilitates.

CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE #8