



# The Process of Awakening



THOMAS KEATING

(This is an excerpt from a conversation between members of the Denver Center for Contemplative Living and Thomas Keating on April 28th, 2016 at St. Benedict's Monastery)

Our ultimate goal is to integrate the active and contemplative dimensions of reality within us and around us, which some mystics call ever-present awareness, enlightenment, or waking up. To handle the details of living a human life without being distracted from this primary vision is not attained through thinking, but through what might be called the practice of *just being*.

To take time just to be, which is to do nothing but be in God's presence for a regular period of time every day seems to be the shortest access to the mystery that is beyond any conceptual consideration. It leads to a communion with God that is more intimate than anybody can imagine or foresee. Divine love never stops coming but waits for us to shed the obstacles in us to awaken fully to the Divine Presence within us.

It's better to use the word "awakening" than "discovering" because "discovering" suggests effort, and even when effort is good, there is still some ego at work. It takes a while to perceive what the obstacles are. We may ruin our health with extreme bodily asceticism and die too soon. The spiritual journey normally takes a long time.

If we experience emotional suffering, there is probably something we haven't quite surrendered yet. If we truly surrender everything we possess, we will know the right thing to do spontaneously, and action inspired by the Spirit is where Centering Prayer is preparing us to go. It grows into contemplative prayer as presented in the Christian contemplative tradition. Saint John of the Cross writes that those who practice meditation keep moving to ever-deeper interior levels until they reach their inmost center, which is where God dwells and is waiting for us. ...

At some point in the spiritual journey, there is a shift where you realize that the best knowledge you can have of God is *no* knowledge. That means letting go of every thought, memory, rigid belief system, harmful forms of cultural conditioning, as well as all possessions. It doesn't mean you despise the values of belief systems because most people need some kind of discipline of mind and body in the beginning. The process of awakening normally takes time. Where is it going and where does it end? It ends in God, which is to say it never ends. ☸

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# Witness to Grace

## Last Days with Fr. Thomas Keating

TED JONES

There came a time when Fr. Thomas Keating's room at the Saint Joseph's Abbey infirmary transformed from a conventional hospital environment into a timeless and sacred space. It seemed always the same: shades drawn, lights on, and the hospital bed periodically rumbling loudly as the mattress inflated to vary the pressure on the different parts of his body. As you entered the room, the head of his bed was against the left hand wall. Along that wall was a small desk with several drawers. On the other side of his bed was an adjustable medical table, where water and other sundries were staged. Four or five chairs were arrayed in a horseshoe configuration around his bed. Sometimes these chairs were all occupied by monks and myself. More often there were just one or two of us. For some of the monks this vigil reflected a love and respect that dated back to Thomas' time as abbot in the 1960's and 70's.

The chair on the far side, closest to the head of the bed and the medical table, would typically be occupied by whomever had assumed the responsibility for administering water from a syringe. This duty could last anywhere from five minutes to half an hour, depending on his thirst. It was a different, more reflective experience in the other chairs, particularly the one at the foot of the bed. Sitting there you could take in the whole room and see Thomas right in front of you. It was from that chair that I once saw him, eyes closed, responding with small writhing gestures to something I could not see. He was moaning softly, clearly in pain. It was at that moment that I noticed for the first time the crucifix on the wall above his head. There was a bone-deep realization that whatever he was suffering, he was enduring for everyone.



Thomas was my uncle. My late mother, Anne Keating Jones, was his older sister by two years. They were close as children and remained so

throughout their lives. As I was growing up, Uncle Parker, as he was known in the family, had a kind of mythic quality: a mysterious monk, who made occasional visits to our Manhattan apartment. It was not until my early twenties that I actually got to know him. He played a key role in my development of a daily meditation practice. Later there was a period when I leaned on him heavily as a teacher, even though my Vipassana practice was obviously different from his own. At that time, I was meditating a lot and working very little. My mother, with whom I had a conflictual relationship, was skeptical of my lifestyle. In her parlance, she took a "dim view" of it. So it was a wonderful surprise when one day she said with approval, "I spoke with your Uncle Parker, and he told me how pleased he was with the progress you're making with your meditation."

Thomas and I stayed in touch quite loosely for many years, but when my mother died in 2014, we became close again. Being unable to attend her funeral, he wrote a letter which was read at the service. The letter revealed a family history of which I had been unaware. It precipitated a series of lengthy phone calls, as he helped me to understand the environment in which he and my mother had grown up. Subsequently, there were visits with him in Snowmass and the recognition that our spiritual paths were converging in the direction of nonduality. Thomas was my teacher again.



The call came the afternoon of September 25, informing me that Thomas was near death and was not expected to survive more than a couple of days. He died one month later on October 25, 2018. During that month, he slept a lot but ate almost nothing, just runny, soft-boiled eggs on the rare occasions when his appetite returned. He basically survived on water alone. This allowed his kidneys to continue to function, but most other health metrics consistently pointed toward an imminent death.<sup>1</sup>





There were frequent episodes of labored breathing. Sometimes his breath stopped for a minute or more, only to suddenly resume. Thomas was in pain much of the time, but once when asked about it, he replied, “I just ignore it.” He took no medication, except for a few doses of lorazepam near the end.

When I visited him on September 26, Thomas was weak but fully coherent. Before I left that day, I was offered the possibility of staying in the guest house the following night. I remain very grateful for the generosity of Abbot Damian Carr and the monastic community, who later provided me with my own room in the senior monks’ quarters. I ended up spending over half of my nights there, which enabled me to be with Thomas for a major part of almost every day.

Within days, Thomas stabilized somewhat, but he lapsed into a delusional state. The content was entirely concerned with Contemplative Outreach, the organization that he had co-founded and nurtured since 1984. With eyes closed, he

addressed unknown persons in an agitated voice, expressing his “authority” over the organization, insisting that meetings be convened, and calling for “the plan” to be activated. Damian and I shared the role of coaxing him back to reality and of assuring him that everything was well taken care of. He was always grateful for this assurance, relaxing briefly, only to return to the same perseveration within minutes. It was only after my wife, Tricia, suggested that we introduce God into the conversation that anything changed. Rather than continuing to assure him, we began suggesting that he put his concerns in God’s hands. Before long, he began intervening in his own dialogue, making that suggestion to himself. The perseveration soon abated and did not return.

Over the next two weeks, Thomas spent most of the time either asleep or apparently engaged in another world, from which he would occasionally emerge with edifying pronouncements. For instance, I was present to hear

him say, “I am what I am, and I’m finding out what that is.” Another time the words were unspoken; as I was leaving his room one evening, I heard his voice and turned to see him still sleeping. But in my head I clearly heard him say, “Without death, there can be no life.”

Damian described to me an instance when he was able to transcribe Thomas’ spontaneous words:

- experiencing
- evolving
- such a gift
- really nothing to do since everything is evolving
- I don’t know what comes next
- trivial of everything
- see without seeing
- a big place
- just gratitude
- even that’s too much
- can be uncomfortable at times
- a dried out old tree
- [smiling/ almost laugh-like]
- I better just relax
- [I tell him to relax and wait and ask him if it’s like waiting—he says yes]

Brother Erik Keeney had been Thomas’ assistant for five years in Snowmass. He then followed him to Spencer when Thomas moved to the infirmary in the spring of 2018. He and Damian were both in the room when Thomas awoke to deliver a stunning, three-minute oration on the state of the world. Seemingly oblivious to their presence, Thomas described the great possibilities for transformation afforded by the “truth proved by silence and science.” Touching on the subjects of poverty, social justice, environment, and disarmament,

he exhorted the nations of the world to create a new order based on compassion and “trust in the God of heaven and earth.”<sup>22</sup>

One evening a different dimension of communication was revealed as I sat meditating while Thomas slept. My body became consumed by an intense energy, which felt like a powerful electric current. This persisted after I returned to my room, and it was difficult to fall asleep. That energy returned full force early the next morning. What transpired next was not a dream but felt as real to me as any experience in my life. I was transported to the Manhattan apartment where I was greeted by mother, who approached me with great warmth and love. She asked, “Can we forgive each other now?” I answered yes and began to cry. We embraced in a moment of reconciliation that had eluded us during her lifetime. Later that morning Thomas was quiet, and he barely acknowledged me when I greeted him. I reported to him in detail what had occurred earlier. I shared my conviction that he had played an important role and expressed my heartfelt gratitude. Without opening his eyes, he responded only with an emphatic, “Wow!”

On October 15, Aaron Langlois, the hospice nurse, huddled with Damian, Erik, and myself in the hallway outside Thomas’s room. He told us, “There’s no medical explanation for why he’s still alive.” But a couple of days later, Thomas mounted a comeback, marked by increased energy and mental clarity. He was much more communicative and was

eager to talk about his plans for “recuperation” and “recovery.” In many ways, the Thomas we had known had returned. This included his sense of humor, which was on display when he decided to tease Aaron about the inaccuracy of his predictions. With Damian and myself also at the bedside, Thomas deadpanned a question to him, “Have you been fired?” None of us understood where this was coming from, and Aaron stammered a quizzical, “No, I haven’t been fired.” Thomas then responded with a wry grin, “Don’t worry. I won’t tell your superiors,” and all four of us erupted in laughter.

This period of exuberance ended after four or five days, and Thomas took a decidedly inward turn. He spoke very little, and I reported to family that he had “one foot in the next world, and one toe still in this one.” His appearance grew increasingly gaunt, with his head reduced to a mere skull covered by a thin layer of skin stretched tightly around it. His breathing deteriorated to the point that he was placed on supplemental oxygen. When he could no longer swallow, small sponges were used to moisten his mouth. One night I felt so sad that with some trepidation, I leaned over his bed and kissed his forehead. His lips formed a slight smile, and he whispered, “Thank you.”

I wasn’t there the night that Thomas died. Erik, who was present with three other monks, later told me that his death had been peaceful: a last breath, a gasp, and he was gone. When they cleansed his body,

a wondrous fragrance filled the room, almost like perfume. His skin was unbroken, with no sign of pressure sores despite a month confined to bed.

After learning of his death, I drove to the monastery and then walked slowly up the hill to the infirmary. It was an extraordinary night: crystal clear, with the moon slightly past full. Reaching the top of the hill where the road turns left, I paused for a while, searching for his spirit in the expanse of the brilliant night sky. It was a surreal, heart-in-the-throat feeling to enter the infirmary and walk down the hall to Thomas’ room for the final time. He looked just the same as he had that morning. I kissed his forehead and then sat down beside him and wept. It was close to 2am when the funeral home came to take his body. I left the infirmary, walking past the guest house and into the field beyond. I stood there for a long time, overwhelmed not just by my emotions, but also by the magnificence of the moonlit landscape and the unmistakable presence of the Divine.

Ten days later, after returning home from Thomas’ funeral, Tricia and I watched *Thomas Keating: A Rising Tide of Silence*, the remarkable biography produced by my brother, Peter. I had seen it several times before, but this time I was struck by something that broke open my heart. In the summer of 1971, Thomas was recovering from surgery in the same infirmary where he would die 47 years later. In the film he described a memory of that time.

*“I was recovering from some operation. I think it was a hernia*

operation. I happened to take a little walk in the evening. I stepped out of the infirmary building in Spencer, and without knowing why or how, I was surrounded and penetrated by incredible love that was absolutely respectful, humble, powerful, immense, penetrating. So I had some touches of being loved by God, but this was overwhelming. And I just happened to look up, and there was a full moon. I realized that God had made that moon just for that night so that I could celebrate in a kind of romantic way this revelation of his love for me ... And as I walked down a little way, this tree suddenly illuminated, and my whole life went by on the branches of that tree in about five seconds. And everything seemed to be OK in the sense that nothing matters except this. And so I walked into the field there behind the guest house. And the hay that was coming up and the trees that were coming up and the air and the heat ... Everything was emerging out of God, including me. So I was in such jubilee at this point that I started jumping up and down, something I didn't normally do. And that lasted, I guess, about an hour.

All I can say is this is reality, and nothing else that I ever could do or did do was meaningful compared to this. So it's not a question of reward or approval. It was just the way things are. But this is the destiny not just of individual, exceptional human beings—it is what the whole family of humans is moving to.”<sup>3</sup>

Hearing these words, I realized that I had walked in Thomas' footsteps on the night of his death and that I had stood in the moonlight in the same field where he had danced in jubilation so many years before. There arose a great comfort in the certainty that his spiritual journey had come full circle and that his union with God was now complete.☪

**Ted Jones** is a meditation instructor at the Insight Meditation Center of Newburyport, Massachusetts (USA).

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1. Aaron Langlois, RN, MBA, CHPCA, personal communication. He described a proprietary model that assigns numerical scores to an array of readings and symptoms. In that model a total score of 20 or higher is predictive of death within two to three days. Thomas's score generally ranged from 60 to 80.

2. Erik Keeney, in *Father Thomas Keating: His Interspiritual Legacy and a Vision for the Future*, Session 7, Aspen Chapel video, July 14, 2019, 1:08 - 1:23.

3. Peter C. Jones, Producer, *Thomas Keating: A Rising Tide of Silence*, Temple Rock, 2014, 35:15 - 38:20.



## Centering Prayer Interrupted

Every morning before meditation,  
I close my eyes and whisper to God,  
“Face to face, cheek to cheek,  
mouth to mouth, until  
our breath becomes one.”

Sometimes, I hear the door creak open –  
soft footsteps stop behind me.  
My husband lightly touches my shoulder,  
gently kisses my cheek and quietly leaves.

In the past, a wave of irritation  
would sweep over me as he has  
“interrupted” my meditation,  
but, no more. One day I awoke.

That gentle touch and kiss  
is God loving me through him.  
Who are God's hands and heart but ours?  
I am blessed.

Deborah Marqui  
Healing Gardens, St. Charles, Illinois





MARY JANE YATES  
ADMINISTRATOR

# Staying with the Trouble

God is not necessarily going to take away all our difficulties. [God] does something much more wonderful, which is to join us in them. Thus they become redeeming and healing for ourselves, and at the same time a means of healing for everyone we love, and indeed for everyone in the whole world.

Thomas Keating, *The Transformation of Suffering*

As I think back over my first full year as administrator with Contemplative Outreach, it is difficult to imagine a time more filled with challenge and difficulty, on both a personal and collective level. Along with these words of Fr. Thomas, the title of a book by Donna Haraway resonates deeply as I think back over these past 12 months. A rather complex read, Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, illustrates on an ecological level what I believe Keating was saying about the power of God "making kin" with us during difficult times. In her introduction, Haraway points out that the word *trouble* derives from a 13<sup>th</sup>-century French verb meaning "to stir up," "to make cloudy," "to disturb." And according to Haraway, the word *chthulucene* describes "an age in which the human and non-human are inextricably linked in tentacular practices." As I understand it, Haraway's key message is that the

mixed-up and disturbing times we live in provide the perfect milieu for generating new life, but that this can only happen as we learn to *stay with the trouble* and pay deep attention to the *new relationships* now available to us because of this disturbance – much as the rotting and decaying components of a compost pile generate all kinds of microbes and nutrients needed for new growth. In other words, the main challenge for us in this time of great ecological and social disturbance is to *make kin in lines of inventive connection* [including inter-species connections] *as a way of living and dying well with each other in a thick present* (Haraway, 2016, pg. 1).

Perhaps you already see why Haraway's title and Fr. Keating's words about "joining us in our difficulties" resonated with me in reflecting on our community experience over this past year. Certainly, there has been ample

trouble for many of us. But even more remarkable are the *inventive connections* and new *kin* I have seen forming amid these troubles. I would like to elaborate on a few of these connections, with the prayer that this celebration of "staying with the trouble" will inspire us to understand at ever-deepening levels how Contemplative Outreach (CO) is "a living organism that is interactive, interconnected, interdependent and dynamic." (CO guideline for service #1)

First, on a personal level, the very deep trouble I was invited to stay with last summer was watching my beloved partner of 14 years suffer through and die from a very aggressive form of cancer. This suffering went far beyond what either one of us thought we would ever be able to bear. Yet the heart connections that emerged for both of us in staying with this pain went far deeper than I could

ever have imagined. First, our own love for each other found its deepest home in our final hours of waiting and watching together: Rod from beyond any ordinary level of consciousness, and me from the depth of music and tears that enveloped both of us during that time. And in the months after he passed, the outpouring of sympathy and love I received deepened my own connection with many of you, a gift which enabled me to continue to stay with my grief. My connection with Fr. Thomas also seemed to be strengthened. Not having met him in person or grown up with the idea of communicating with those who have passed, I sensed that Rod's death opened a door to meeting Thomas from the other side. Now what greater gift could a CO administrator ask for than that!

On a collective level, it's hard to imagine a trouble greater than that caused by the Covid pandemic. With infections and deaths still soaring in places and the livelihoods of millions in jeopardy, CO has been challenged to stay with our own trouble of shifting many of our programs to Zoom and grappling with how the pandemic will affect the role of smaller, face-to-face prayer groups and retreats that have traditionally played such an important role in our community life. While not easy questions, there are some fruits arising from staying with this trouble.

First, the inventive connections that have developed in our international community since the advent of the pandemic are truly amazing. The first obvious experience of this Covid-related

connection happened with the "Global Embrace" conference co-hosted with South Africa in May of 2020 (the recordings are freely available on our YouTube channel). And think how things have evolved since then using Zoom: our first international offering of a Centering Prayer Introductory Workshop last July; the Lectio Divina and Welcoming Prayer service teams offered workshops and practice sessions, respectively, to a global audience; followed by the beautiful experience we had celebrating Thomas' birthday on United in Prayer Day in March! A translation working group comprised of members of our international communities also now meet regularly via Zoom to support each other with the sometimes-challenging task of translating Fr. Keating's work into over 17 different languages. Now if that isn't staying with the trouble through inventive connection I don't know what is!

Beyond the trouble of Covid, our community also grew new connections in our efforts to stay with some of the very real social and political disturbances of this past year—not an easy task when some of these troubles have their roots in centuries-old imbalances in economic, social and spiritual realms. One example of this is the daily prayer group that was started by our Minnesota, USA chapter in response to the death of George Floyd in May 2020. This group continues to this day as a way of staying with the troubled spirits of both the perpetrators and victims of racial violence in this age of deepened disparity. Similarly, our

12-Step Outreach groups continue to serve those suffering with the generational effects of substance abuse, self-hatred and harm that plague so many in our human family. Where would our world be without these connections and prayers? Certainly not experiencing the kind of generativity and deep compassion that I see emanating from so many in these 12-Step groups and communities. And related to this, I have seen some beautiful connections emerging among those serving our prison contemplative community over this past year. Thanks to the work of Chandra Hanson, Kathy Devaney and a small team of dedicated volunteers, a supportive network is evolving for those involved in this unique ministry, a network that is essential during these times when meeting with those behind walls is especially difficult.

Given the evidence of this past year, it is clear Contemplative Outreach has much to offer in terms of a "staying power" that may be of enormous benefit to our world. After all, is not our core practice one of "staying with the trouble"? Each day as we sit with the myriad of thoughts, feelings and sensations that bombard us during our prayer period, we open ourselves to an ever-deepening connection with ourselves, with the ones we love, and indeed with everyone in the whole world, both human and non-human. With such a tentacular practice, how can we help but generate new life and healing? ☸

# Our Story is God's Story

BRIAN ALDWORTH

In 1976 in apartheid South Africa, all white males from the age of 18 were conscripted into the army and also had to serve periodic three-month terms of border duty. I was in a brigade in northern Namibia near Angola protecting our borders against the “enemy” insurgents. After three months of this, most of the guys in my regiment became “bossies”—a lovely South African term meaning bush-mad.

With my savings and my danger pay I decided to hitchhike through Europe and the Middle East for a year when I was 21. My friend Gail had the same plan but for later. So after seven months of travelling and working, and spending an amazing two months on a kibbutz on the outskirts of Jerusalem, we finally met at Heathrow in March 1977. And then our friendship turned into romance and we travelled together as Mr and Mrs Aldworth!

Before returning to South Africa we decided to spend a weekend at Findhorn in northern Scotland as I really wanted Gail to see how humans and nature co-operate together at this remarkable place. We had an interview with Eileen Caddy, who co-founded the centre in 1962. She was (to my mind) a typical elderly English lady fussing around making tea for us and

chatting all the time. She said matter-of-factly that she talks to God all the time as if God was physically present. For years she'd spend two to three hours every day in silent meditation, listening to God's Word—which is what built up Findhorn. We were already in the practise of meditation together every day. Somehow Eileen must have touched us very deeply because later that night during our meditation, I had this spine-tingling sensation of something very powerful and beautiful between us. Gail received a vision of our future path and a message from God: “You are the chosen ones. Carry out the life I have laid out for you. I will always be with you. Remember in your darkest hours to remain with Me. Time will tell, but always have faith in Me.”

For thirteen years we followed a very disciplined spiritual path and were also much involved in the church. We couldn't have children, so we then adopted two black children in 1991 and 1993. In 1991 the bill was before Parliament to allow for mixed marriages, adoptions, mixed schools, mixed recreational areas, and so on, as a compromise before real democracy kicked in in 1994. So we took custody of Edward when he was a week old and had to wait seven months before the law was actually passed. We were the





first trans-racial adoptive parents in South Africa. I remember the magistrate, with a distasteful expression on his face spitting out in a very heavy Afrikaans accent: “Are you *aware* of the *nature* of this child?” With our next child, Elizabeth, at the dawn of a new South Africa, we were treated with such courtesy and assistance by a different magistrate and social worker who were also Afrikaners.

Of course, as most parents know, young children turn your lives upside down. We hardly had time to pray and going to church usually turned us into nervous wrecks as both children were hyper-active!

In 1996 we discovered Contemplative Outreach and every morning at 5.30am, with a mug of steaming tea we would read a passage from one of the contemplative books and then would sit in Centering Prayer. After that we woke the kids and that half hour in prayer calmed us so much that getting the kids ready for school and preparing to go to work was always a calm exercise. We lived in Pretoria in a big house which was like a railway station—always full of people. Our children had their friends around and we had regular Centering Prayer meetings, mornings of recollection, yoga classes, enneagram and Reiki workshops and yet there was harmony. Our children and their friends were always respectful when we needed silence. Edward, being very enterprising would offer to wash the cars of our visitors for extra pocket money!

Looking back, after 45 years of travelling the same path I can see four distinct phases:

- The first 13 years of our marriage when we listened to and obeyed God’s voice, meditated daily and prayed the Divine Office three times a day;
- When the children were young and it seemed our spiritual life had almost evaporated—but we were learning other vital life lessons;
- Coming to contemplative prayer, the prayer of deep silence; allowing the Divine Therapist to heal deeply and to hear God speak to us, this time through Lectio Divina. The time of locutions and visions had passed;
- The maturation of the spiritual journey. Sometimes we feel God strongly, then God seems to disappear—the testing and strengthening of faith. Many times we could find no answers and had to grope blindly until suddenly the right door seemed to open. The huge stresses of the Covid epidemic on our way of life—so bad that Gail’s diabetes spiked out of control and she had to have part of her leg amputated; my side businesses, which were supposed to supplement our pension, hardly produced any sales; our kids both unemployed and doing whatever they can just to survive. These are different lessons and very hard. But something must be working because all the people we come into contact with each day—no matter how we feel—seem to respond to the peace and love that emanates from us, as unaware to us, God has worked transforming miracles on us. Edward was anti-God but in the last few years has been asking us to pray for

him and has hung a rosary above his bed. Elizabeth refuses to go to church because she thinks they are all hypocrites and yet she helps me teach catechism to teenagers, which in turn has helped to develop her own faith.

It’s true that God works in mysterious ways. Lately I’ve been wondering if we took the right path and whether everything has been a gigantic hoax, but I get over it and the strengths, compassion and love that developed in us because of spending most of our working lives in the NGO sector—mentally handicapped people, street children, geriatric nursing, hospice, community development, alternative therapies and so on—didn’t make us wealthy but rich beyond all measure. Working closely with God, following the path laid out can be a roller coaster ride, bringing about such doubt and depression and yet is immeasurably full—full of life and love, full of joy and laughter.

Julian of Norwich assures us, “Suddenly you will be taken out of all your pain, all your sickness, all your unrest and all your woe. And you will come up above, and you will have Me for your reward, and you will be filled full of joy and bliss, and you will never again have any kind of pain, any kind of sickness, any kind of displeasure, no lack of will, but always joy and bliss without end.” ☩

**Brian Aldworth** is South African Contemplative Outreach national co-coordinator



# A Call to Being

GARO NOKHOUDIAN

I was born and raised in an Armenian Apostolic family in Beirut, Lebanon. The earliest memories I have of spiritual influence go back to my childhood, when my family lived with my paternal grandparents. From my bed at night, before going to sleep, I used to watch my grandmother, sitting in her bed, whispering her cries to a God who seemed to be intimately lending His ear. The trinity of women in my life, my mother and both of my grandmothers, were the ones who nurtured me into a praying life by example. They never had to tell me to pray. I know they have always prayed for my brothers and me. In fact, I have felt led by the Spirit through their prayers!

As a kid, I served at the church altar, and went to Sunday school. Later, in my teenage years, I was involved with a church youth group that had a radical approach to spiritual matters. When I turned 18, I felt the world closing in on me, so I started looking for guidance elsewhere. Thank God help came in the form of a spiritual director, who advised me and encouraged me towards change. Suddenly, I was a free agent ... I started to breathe in peace and breathe out love and experienced three days of beauty emanating bliss. Later I spent many years trying unsuccessfully to recapture the experiences of those days.

I spent many years searching for my Lord in different places: the church outside the Church. In 1990, my spiritual hunger led me to Transcendental Meditation, later to Kriya Yoga. I stuck with the latter, getting lessons by mail, until I moved to Montreal, Quebec, Canada, where I joined a group. By this time, my practice of meditation was on and off, left to my whims.

On the Kriya Yoga altar, Jesus Christ was one of the central avatars among six. I wanted to get initiated to the next and final meditation technique. However, I had a problem: my deep conviction was that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and, most importantly, God. I could not go through the initiation as a Christian. I spoke about my problem to one of the brothers. He kindly suggested that I read the writings of Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross. This is when I discovered the contemplative dimension of Christianity, my journey back home! My eyes were opened to see the Church inside the church.



It took me some time to find different schools of practice in contemplative Christianity: the Jesus Prayer, Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer. I experimented with them alone, sometimes even being harmed by my blind ignorance and stubbornness. In July of 2007, I took the conscious decision to be dedicated to a steady practice of Centering Prayer. I started reading Fr. Thomas Keating's books, and ordered Contemplative Outreach materials. In May 2009, Fr. Keating visited Montreal and gave a Centering Prayer introductory weekend workshop at Saint Joseph's Oratory of Mount Royal. I attended with my spouse. In September of the same year the first Centering Prayer group was launched in Montreal, and I finally got the support and instructions I needed to continue my spiritual journey, loyal to a contemplative practice that not only gave me a space to breathe in peace, but also led me to a life of transformation.

I am a member of Christ's body now. His grace makes me so. I am a humble servant, who claims his sonship. I believe this was possible through the path of Centering Prayer; by the grace of consistent practice, God showed a mystical dimension, where hardships are not what they seem, but are in fact doors leading to spiritual growth. Difficult stages of life are witnesses of a yearning that seeks the emancipation

of consciousness with a unitive intent. Every time a door closed God gave me the assurance that the right one was awaiting. I even started appreciating closed doors that protected me from distractions to avoid wasting time and energy!

A lot has changed since the day I finally decided to practice my faith through Centering Prayer. I gradually started to see and realise the change in me. I started to see myself as I am: a sinner, yet very much loved and cared for by God. The fellowship I found in the groups I belonged to, the silent retreats and especially the friendship of provincial leaders in the Centering Prayer community, have been miraculous in the way they supported my practice, in deepening my relationship with the Lord and in constantly reshaping my outlook towards life in general.

Fr. Thomas Keating's teachings have been a framework, nourishing and sustaining my intention, practice, lifestyle and above all my surrender to God's loving will. The teachings have made it possible to mature spiritually while living in the world. It was a dream come true when the church I belong to gave me its blessing to launch and establish three Centering Prayer groups in our native tongue, Armenian, in Montreal. More so, the teachings have a very close relationship and deep-rooted connection with Christian Orthodox spirituality and the desert fathers and mothers.

This openness is dear to my heart, having read about and practiced the Jesus Prayer. It rings true with the contemplative spirituality of the Armenian mystic Gregory of Narek. Fr. Keating's life work brings Christian traditions together and reveals that my story is yours, and yours is mine; we all belong to each other, we are ONE in Spirit!

To bring an integrated unity to my life, the practice I treasure most, complementing Centering Prayer, is the "guard of the heart." It is the "watchfulness" of the desert fathers and mothers. Fr. Keating not only mentioned it, but also gave guidelines of practice (see *Contemplative Outreach Newsletter*, June 2020, p. 4). Once contemplative prayer is established, the "guard of the heart" facilitates contemplative living. This is when life becomes a stream of genuine welcome to the Spirit inhabiting our inner rooms, our daily lives, by prospering and expressing Itself through authentic service.

In closing, I would like to share a sentence that the Spirit impressed upon my heart one morning, during a silent retreat, while I was still being hard on myself and trying to achieve. The Spirit summed up the path of Centering Prayer with the following words: ***"You are doing your part, let Me do Mine: Just be!"*** ☩

**Dcn. Garo Nokhoudian** is a member of Sourp Hagop Armenian Church in Montreal, Qc, Canada. He is a commissioned presenter of Centering Prayer Introductory Workshops and has served on the board of directors of Contemplative Outreach Quebec for a few years. He has started and facilitates three Centering Prayer groups in his church in Armenian. His email address is: garbo121@gmail.com

# Beyond the White Line

As Ray Leonardini states in his book *Going Inside*, “Jesus’ companionship with the marginalized was the place where he found his community of meaning and perspective. It was the place where he could actually grasp the goodness and unconditional love of the Ultimate Mystery he called Father.” So it is that the beauty of Centering Prayer in the prison setting is deeply appreciated by those who have experienced it. We’d like to share with you how one volunteer describes his first passage into the heart of the prison.

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The first time I entered Folsom State Prison is still deeply etched in my memory. Old Folsom Prison was built by prisoners between 1857 and 1880 out of huge blocks of granite. It looks like a medieval castle with a high and very thick granite wall encircling it. To get to the chapel, deep inside the “castle,” you must pass through multiple locked doors, most of which close behind you with an unforgettable heavy metallic clank. That first night, all my senses were tingling as we made our way through two cell blocks where we could look through bars into the five feet by nine feet cells, each filled with two bunks, a toilet, sink and two men. I made a mental note of the lack of privacy and claustrophobia of the cells. We were within an arm’s length of many prisoners returning to their cells, as we headed deep into the prison to the chapel.

Once there, we locked ourselves into the chapel along with about 30 men. I helped the men move chairs into a circle in preparation for prayer. There were men of all ages and races present. When we sat down to pray, I chose a seat between a very large, muscular man on my right and a smaller man on my left. Just as I closed my eyes to pray, the thought popped into my head, “I wonder what these two men did that put them in prison?” A small, quiet voice within me said, “Let go of *that* thought!” which, of course, is the same advice that comes with *any* thought during Centering Prayer, no matter where you are sitting.

When the prayer period was over, Ray led a lesson on the spiritual journey and a discussion ensued. Having been told that it might take a few months to be accepted into the group, I didn’t say a word, but listened intently. I could tell that some men’s

comments came from their personal experience of Centering Prayer which connected with my own experience of prayer. What seemed most apparent was that no matter our previous life history, no matter any difference in race, age, or anything else, in that chapel we were very palpably all equals before God. All of us were seeking the same intimacy with God in the silence of prayer.

The evening seemed to pass very quickly. When the meeting broke up, one man came over and said to me, “I have a question I’m just wondering why you decided to come here and join us tonight.” I couldn’t help but feel that I was being tested, but without hesitating I told him the truth. “Well, Centering Prayer has changed my life very deeply. When I heard that people in prison were practicing it, I wanted to support your prayer practice. But there is a second reason as well.” “What’s that?” he asked. “I came to learn from you. Centering Prayer has taught me a lot. If you’re willing to share with me, I’d like to know what Centering Prayer has taught you.” I waited to see his reaction. He smiled broadly and a friendship was born on the spot. He took me under his wing, and our conversation continued as he walked with me out of the chapel into the courtyard filled with prisoners who had not joined us in prayer.

We said our good-byes to the men on one side of a white line painted on the ground which they can’t cross without permission. Being new, I didn’t notice this white line until a month later. We then walked freely across the line and back into the cell block. We started to slowly make our way through the series of locked gates to get to the freedom of the parking lot. After a few steps, a thought occurred to me. “I’m hungry. Maybe I’ll stop on the drive home and get





a hamburger.” Suddenly, I felt as though 10,000 pounds of bricks fell from the ceiling on top of me. “Wow!” I thought, “I never knew getting a hamburger was a *privilege*! The men in here have no freedom to do *anything*, while every single day I do so many things that I take for granted!” Another thought immediately took its place. “But, in another way, I just experienced a very deep freedom with the men I just met as we sat together in prayer.”

I have learned an amazing amount from joining in prayer and discussion with those in prison, mostly about myself. There’s something very profound about the willingness of both prisoners and volunteers to be vulnerable with each other and share discussions of the deep truths God reveals to each of us in the silence of prayer; it keeps me coming back. Our shared practice of Centering Prayer connects us in love, and we learn deeply from each other every time I’m there. So, I found what I came looking for, but I have also found so *much more*.

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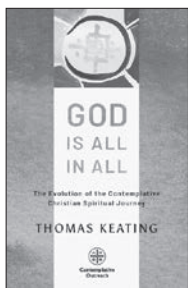
This past winter, Contemplative Outreach conducted a survey to gain insight into what would assist current volunteers or those interested in sharing Centering Prayer and the spiritual journey inside prison walls. The overwhelming response was interest in connecting with others doing the same. A group has formed to take on the challenge of prayerful discernment regarding next steps. We stand on the shoulders of those who have deeply and faithfully gone before us. It is with gratitude to them, volunteers and prisoners, that we come together to serve as the Prison Outreach Service Team. Please pray for us, and if you feel so moved, join our efforts! You can also find more information on the Contemplative Outreach website. ☸

The Prison Outreach Service Team formed when eight of us volunteered to analyze the results of the survey conducted in February and March. Each of us has been profoundly affected by transformation “inside the walls.” We have tasted new freedom from our own emotional programs for happiness through this outreach and would be glad to hear from you at [coprisonliaison@gmail.com](mailto:coprisonliaison@gmail.com)

#### ***Prison Outreach Service Team***

Hampton Deck	Kathy Devaney
Chandra Hanson	Doug Laplante
Ray Mueller	Susan Turpin
Rita Weick	Paul Witmer

## God is All in All by Thomas Keating



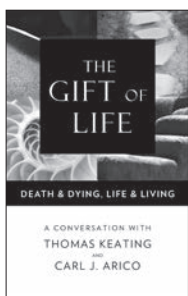
An edited transcript of a keynote talk that Fr. Thomas gave in 2012.

Topics include:

- the infinite compassion and the mercy of God
- the three stages of the transformational spiritual journey
- the new cosmology, human nature-, science and their relationship to spirituality
- the message of the cross for our times
- the meaning of redemption
- and more ...

Hardcopy \$25 USD or digital PDF \$13 USD

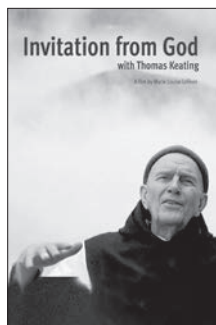
## The Gift of Life – Death & Dying, Life & Living companion book



An edited transcript of the DVD series by the same name. It contains beautiful supporting images and quotations for reflection. The book is a valuable companion to viewing the series, or can serve as a thoughtful reader, independent of the DVD series. This is an intimate conversation between Fr. Thomas Keating and Fr. Carl Arico focusing on the transformative process of death and dying as part of, rather than the end of, life's journey.

Hardcopy \$12 USD or digital PDF \$8 USD

## Invitation from God film and booklet



A wonderful introduction to the subject of contemplation and the spiritual journey and its implications for personal and global freedom. It could also serve as the enrichment in a retreat or for prayer groups. Danish film director, Marie Louise Lefevre interviewed Fr. Thomas Keating in 2006 and what resulted was a spiritually enriching and stunningly

beautiful film. The conversation between the director and Fr. Thomas and the beauty of the film's images serve to express what the contemplative life is about. With 19-page booklet.

- Introduction by Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler
- Invitation from God (main segment)

There are eight more selected conversations which total 90 minutes.

- The Five Levels of Consciousness
- Lectio Divina – Spiritual Reading of Scripture
- Centering Prayer
- Prayer in Secret – Matthew 6:6
- Centering Prayer and Divine Therapy
- The Spiral Staircase and The Paschal Mystery
- The Great Banquet: All are Invited
- Inter-Religious Dialogue and The Concept of God

Hardcopy DVD and booklet: \$30 USD

Online video and PDF booklet: \$15 USD

Mp3 audio and PDF booklet: \$8 USD



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

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

A very early recording of Fr. Thomas from August 1983 at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado (USA) was recently obtained:

- ▶ **Love in Christianity - Parts 1 & 2**, Thomas Keating
- ▶ **Love in Christianity - Part 3**, Thomas Keating

A Series of 30-Minute Welcoming Prayer Practice Sessions are available under the Welcoming Prayer playlist.

- ▶ View full playlist online and scroll down to practice sessions.



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Choose US or International Contacts.

### 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*



#### ENGLISH SPEAKING PERSONS

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

# Save *the* Date



## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

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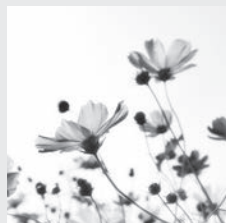
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# Contemplative Outreach

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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We believe that the Christian contemplative tradition and its expression in service is the common ground for Christian unity.

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