



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

"Centering Prayer" excerpted from *Heartfulness: Transformation in Christ*

Thomas Keating and Betty Sue Flowers

Keating: In Jesus' wisdom saying in Matthew 6:6 where he gives a formula of prayer which is also a formula for cultivating interior silence, we hear that the first step is to enter our inner room. Sometimes translated "private room" but since most people didn't have a private room in those days and the Desert Fathers understood this and interpreted this saying to refer to the spiritual level of our being. The invitation that Jesus extends here is, if you want to pray, enter your inner room, to this spiritual level of our being which is the intuitive level of the spiritual will, which is the realm of choice.

Flowers: If I want to enter into this relationship, to pursue this path, what do I do? I know it's a "not-doing" but how do I do "not-doing?"

Keating: First of all, there's a lot of things you *have* to do in the way of bringing your life on the conscious level in some accord with your aspiration. We have to let go of some things that are obviously obstacles and cultivate habits of mind and thought and behavior that are more conducive to this listening process.

It's not a magic carpet to bliss, that's for sure. It's a transformative process, that involves, if you want to put it bluntly, the death of the false self.

This shouldn't be a surprise to Christians because in Baptism they already agreed to do this, if they were conscious. The whole symbolism of the baptismal rite is descent into the water, a symbol of descent into purification that is one of the symbols of water in Scripture. And then the emersion out of the water. Just immersion wouldn't do it. You don't emerge from nothing, you emerge from something. And so, what we emerge from is the attachment to the sinful – or self-centered might be a better word – projects of life that are rooted in the emotional programs for happiness and excessive dependence on a group. By that I mean that one is prepared to either not to think at all about a separate self or individuality or our own conscience, or our own integrity, but to subject all these things to the approval of the group in order to be accepted. This is not a healthy attitude, and which Jesus has attacked so strongly in that wisdom saying, "Unless you give up

your family and children and wife and property and your inmost self – notice – you can't be my disciple.' So, the whole attachment, or the whole life that built up around those instinctual needs for happiness has to be let go of. Without regrets. Goodbye and good luck.

Little by little then, we enter into prayer without intentionality except to consent. And consent becomes surrender. And surrender becomes total receptivity as this process evolves. And total receptivity is without effort, is effortless, is peaceful. It's free and has nothing to do with attaining something, or getting anything, or the desire for enlightenment, the desire for peace, the desire for spiritual experience. All this is still ego, however devoutly masked. So, no thinking, no reflection, no desires, no words, no-thing.

Our chief job is to keep letting go of our attachments as we perceive them, especially those that we feel are opposed to love. One of these obviously would be an unwillingness to forgive. Another would be a tendency to judge others in a moral kind of context, including ourselves, if this is excessive. So that basically, the less we think of ourselves, the better this process goes, as well as the faster it goes. The formula that Jesus gave us in Matthew 6:6, which Centering Prayer is based on, is a kind of cascading movement of a deeper silence. Deeper listening, if you prefer, in which we first deliberately let go of the external tumult of the world or of our anxieties or concerns and turn it over to God for the 20 minutes or half an hour or whatever time we're doing this prayer.

It's not a question of doing anything but *being* for these 20 minutes or whatever the time is. And when this is challenged by the usual flow of thoughts which are inevitable, we simply, quietly, without being annoyed or distressed, return to our original intention by some symbol which has no inherent value in itself, but is simply a way of renewing or rejoining our consciousness or attentiveness to the general loving presence that we are calling God.

Flowers: How can you help your capacity to receive? Maybe that's just everything we've been talking about, really?

Keating: By giving up the false self. The false self is busy doing something else. And what it's doing is useless. So, by discontinuing that activity, one has a great deal of time for constructive activity, such as service of others and still is resting even in the midst of the action.

Flowers: It seems to me that, paradoxical though it sounds, that people who are on this journey who have succeeded to some extent in getting rid of this false self appear more truly unique. They appear to be more individual than people who are hard at work creating their own individuality.

Keating: Well, yes!

Flowers: A real uniqueness shows through. It makes them extremely attractive to other people who want to be around that beauty of the unique.

Keating: Well, all I could say to that is: what are you waiting for? All you have to do is stop being who you think you are and you couldn't be more delightful. Because there's

nothing more beautiful than the uniqueness that God has created. It's just buried like a diamond underneath a pile of garbage or something else. That's not God's fault but that's the misuse of our freedom and the imposition on us of all the negative forces in the environment and our heredity and our social milieu. It is a job to climb out of those influences. But all the work is in letting go of those influences. Not reinforcing them. You don't have to create the beauty; you've got the beauty. You don't have to create the freedom; you've got it. You don't have to create the image of God in you; you have it. You don't have to win over God's love; you have more than you know what to do with. You don't have to become more beautiful because nothing could be more beautiful than your own, particular uniqueness.