

Deepening Practice

(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. Another excerpt was published in the [June 2021 issue](#) of this newsletter.)

I have noticed that many people who come to our retreat house are coming now from different parts of the world. They seem to be increasingly serious about the Centering Prayer practice and more committed to deeper interior silence. Some have been coming on retreat for years, but there are also new people attending. The presence of older people is an invitation to younger folks to move more seriously into Centering Prayer. ...

Q: *[People ask], "How can I deepen my practice?" ... [I]t seems almost obvious that the way to deepen the practice is to do the practice.*

T.K.: It is. ... One suggestion is to do practices for daily life in addition to silent periods of prayer and meditation. ... In addition, we need to integrate contemplation and action if we want to be in continuous and conscious union with God.

Are there ways to help beginners and advancing practitioners who are struggling? One of the things they need to know is that it's alright to be distracted most of the time and fail in trying to remember the Divine Presence. They need to be reassured that it

doesn't matter. During Centering Prayer all that God asks of them is to keep doing the practice, let go of thoughts promptly, and not identify with the content of their endless stream of unwanted thoughts. ...

Daily life presents all kinds of situations that make attention to God's presence difficult ... Even in an environment that is relentlessly contrary to interior silence and recollection, one can still practice Centering Prayer and enjoy its fruits no matter what external obstacles may arise.

Centering Prayer is not a bad title for this overall process because you are constantly growing, not just in the practice of the method, but in the actual experience of God's presence.

Q: *When you talk about practices for active life and of bringing the fruits of Centering Prayer into daily life, that is what I really think of as contemplation. ...*

T.K.: Yes. In other words, if you do Centering Prayer but do not bring its fruits into active life through practices like the Welcoming Prayer, the Active Prayer sentence, or Guard of the Heart – you will have trouble. ...

Centering Prayer as a practice is a strong support in the face of impossible situations and enables you to change self-centered motivation. You need to have enough Centering Prayer and quiet time to balance the amount of activities you're in. Otherwise, your mind gets distracted from God and you get overly concerned about endless details. ☮

([Visit the Contemplative Outreach website](#) for more information on practices for daily life.)

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MARY JANE YATES
ADMINISTRATOR

Diversity Matters

*We embrace the process of transformation in Christ,
both in ourselves and in others,
through the practice of Centering Prayer.*

Contemplative Outreach Vision Statement



*How many, how many, how many
Make up a world!*

And then I think of that old idea: the singular and the eternal.

*One cup, in which everything is swirled
Back to the color of the sea and the sky
Imagine it!*

Mary Oliver, *Why I Wake Early*

Imagine a world where sunsets were always the same colour. Or forests only had one kind of plant. Or food only ever had one flavour. When we are tuned into our senses and the natural world, it's easy to recognize the importance of diversity. So why is it that we seem to have such difficulty in embracing the diversity within our own species? We hear another language and tune it out as being 'irrelevant' to our own conversations. We see a different lifestyle and deem it 'wrong' or 'immoral.' We hear an opposing viewpoint and judge it as 'uninformed' or 'radical.' Yet according to ecologists, a world without diversity in both biology and human culture will not survive.

So how does this relate to Contemplative Outreach (CO)? For years, the most common set of questions expressed by the governing board, staff and practitioners worldwide are 'where are the young people?' and 'where are the people of colour' in Centering Prayer groups and events? We describe ourselves as an evolving community yet perhaps have not seen the outward signs of this evolution as quickly as we hoped. Is this perhaps because we have not yet recognized how essential diversity is to our personal transformation and growth as a community? And not just diversity of colour and age but of gender, culture, religion and

viewpoints of all kinds? Fr. Thomas hints at this with these words from *That We May be One*:

God's diversity is manifested in the multitude of reactions of human beings. This diversity is not meant to lead to wars, as it has in human history, but to the enrichment of perceiving God from the infinite number of perspectives that human beings can perceive.

In addition, we cannot negotiate the spiritual journey without a community to challenge us, to experiencing ourselves reacting with other people and seeing God in them ...

Given how essential diversity seems to be, how might CO continue to widen our embrace in practical and concrete ways? Our foundation for this is found in Theological Principle # 12:

Centering Prayer inspires ever-increasing regard for others, especially for the poor and those abandoned or exploited in the various throw-away cultures of our time. ... Centering Prayer also enables us to respond to the Divine presence in the whole human family, and in all of creation.

In other words, the cornerstone of our journey to become a more diverse community is for each of us to continue our commitment to daily practice of Centering Prayer, which we are assured will inspire in us an ever-increasing regard for others and the practical ability to respond to the wide diversity of needs in this world. And I have seen signs of this more and more over this past year.

First, there has been a growing interest by many to learn diverse ways of sharing the practice of Centering Prayer. One example of this was the presenter training program initiated by the Global Team (responsible for the needs of non-Spanish, non-French-speaking Centering Prayer practitioners outside the US) for members of the international community who wanted to share the prayer but had no chapter structure to facilitate presenter training in the more conventional way. This online offering ended up engaging a very diverse group, with trainees from Kenya, Italy, the

Bahamas, the Netherlands, the UK and Canada, and mentors from South Africa, the UK, the West Indies, Czechia and Canada. Both trainees and mentors found this an incredibly rich experience and as a participant myself, I learned the importance of *humility and attentive listening* in transmitting the prayer rather than relying on *strict policies* and *rigid rules* to guide our practice (CO Guideline for Service #3).

Other examples of our 'increasing regard for others' include the variety of languages now available on our CO website and the enthusiastic participation by so many in our multilingual, multicultural United in Prayer Day. Our service teams are also meeting the challenge of diverse time zones in planning their events. Efforts continue by our Prison Outreach Service Team to engage those who experience so many cultural and structural barriers to sharing the prayer. We have welcomed Colleen Thomas as our first Diversity Outreach Coordinator and the governing board and staff of CO have now drafted this equities-focused statement to consider in our approach to decision-making:

*Contemplative Outreach (CO) recognizes that certain barriers exist in our efforts to share Centering Prayer and its contemplative vision as widely as possible. (CO Guideline for Service #1). These barriers include things like age, geographic location, language, culture and socioeconomic status. To address these barriers, CO takes an **equities**-focused approach to the use of our financial resources. This means that wherever possible, we prioritize our spending on efforts to make available the gift of Centering Prayer to those who may be marginalized in any way by the power structures of our time.*

All these examples show that the prayer is indeed enabling us to widen our embrace far beyond what we perhaps imagined CO was capable of. Yet much more is to be done if we are truly to become that "one cup swirled back to sea and sky." Won't you continue to imagine it with me? ☸

A Hermitage in Ordinary Life

CHARLOTTE WEAVER-GELZER
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At the start of Covid-19 mandatory shut-down, the Episcopal diocese in which I am a member turned to worship online. The attempts at replicating the worship experience of a brick-and-mortar sanctuary produced in me a profound realization that my spirit was *demanding* silence. All the talking as usual, as if talking could return the usual to daily life, made me sharply aware of my intense need for quiet, silence, stillness. I've realized since that I was finally hearing my spirit. The urge to silence and solitude was old, old, old, and only in these new extremes did the sound in my heart reach awareness of mind.

A few days into the wilderness of Covid, I remembered that I was registered with [Meditation Chapel](#). But I could not imagine sacred space online and I resisted investing an hour in the middle of the day. Really, I was resisting commitment. The offer from Meditation Chapel raised such strong urgency in me that I could only walk it off till the urgency seemed to fade. Clearly engagement at that level meant commitment; that it was anything but commitment didn't even occur to me. The call felt too much to answer.

Of course, when everything everywhere shut down, I had nothing *but* hours, all day long. I thought I'd try a meeting in the Thomas Keating chapel. Other than learning Zoom, I arrived without intention or effort. So I was rather suddenly present with Corey Krupowicz and 25 or 30 others. That first entry into virtual space among strangers in all ignorance of the hour ahead felt very edgy—that is, edges and lines were both sensible *and* visible; even so, I noticed I felt no walls made by our differences. As people entered the chapel, Corey welcomed each one quietly, and by name. The grace of his welcome brought me right over the line of my resistance before I could think.

In delight, I realized people were from *everywhere*. My delight increased when I understood that for one hour, we were in all hours of the day simultaneously. Looking at each other in Sweden where it was 7p.m., in Cape Town, in Ireland, France and England at 6 p.m., in Australia at 2:30 a.m. tomorrow, in Sri Lanka at 10 p.m. still today; in Canada and Colorado people were at 10 in the morning behind me at 1 p.m.; those Ohio, Connecticut and Virginia were in the hour with me. We were 10 years into practicing, we were completely new, we were three months into Centering, we'd never heard of Thomas Keating—all at the same moment.

And, oh, the blessed silence! All of us together sank into the quiet. I was filled with wonder and awareness of the presence of God. I recognized this awareness from the silent retreats I'd made in previous years. Even now in the sangha I experience that *same quality of silence and presence* virtually that I have known in physical proximity on silent retreats. And why not? Is the Holy Spirit limited by miles or kilometers, by borders, technology, or by the timed rotations of sun and earth?

Corey called the hour of meeting 'the sangha'—Sanskrit meaning a *community of joined lives*. Over the weeks and months beginning in March 2020, the many people entering the sangha became familiar by face and voice. Even those who only came once fit right in, each a welcomed part of the whole. The surgeon in Portugal with only 30 minutes on break between shifts on the Covid ward; the pastor in Jamaica who came for a week before a hurricane struck his town; the fellow just returned from time working in Zambia and suddenly bereft of what had been a certain calling; the professional musician who came between his scheduled Zoom classes with pupils; all these fit right in with therapists learning to do all



their listening virtually, the woman whose sister was far away and gravely ill, the new widow, the architect whose work was suddenly canceled, the lawyer whose cases had all come to a pause, the nurse just coming off her 12 hour shift: for one hour all of us present were like a low tide flowing in and out again on a shoreline appearing under our feet as we gathered to sit.

Corey hosted the hour every day, seven days a week, for four months. Then, in June of 2020, he told the sangha that lockdown had lifted locally, and he needed to go back to work. The simplicity with which he handled the sangha every day was matched by the simplicity of the transition he made from shaping and hosting the sangha to letting its leadership go into other hands. Long schooled in the slow, power-soaked motions of change in hierarchical church settings, I was astounded by the swiftness and grace of this shift. Ten people in the group volunteered to substitute; each picked a day of the week to lead.

Daily since then, including Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, Easter, a host is there to open the Keating chapel at the appointed hour. Usually between 20 and 25 people gather as the sangha. People come and go as they can. The energy of the Divine

Indwelling brings us to meet, spirit to spirit, heart to heart, making something completely new and different out of common life on common ground. The sangha has an extraordinary ambiance, an experience without the usual limits that divide and separate.

Hosts in the sangha provide consistency of timing, space, rubrics and a lectio reading, but not 'leadership' in the standard sense of taking charge. The hosts bring lectio readings of their own choice, drawn from wisdom and mystic texts across most traditions—Muslim, Hindu, Taoist, Zen Buddhist, Jewish, Christian in many denominational expressions, and from secular disciplines, too—biology, geology, astronomy, physics, poetry, essays, even music. The hosts sit lightly to their responsibility, glad to serve, grateful to be served. Day after day, by grace the hour of contemplation keeps fresh and open to the Holy Spirit, opening to the lives of those who join the chapel. The trust and intimacy of the hour is profound.

'My' church has returned to in-person worship, but I haven't been back since March of 2020, though I attended a funeral there recently. People greeting me asked me where I've been. I heard myself say, "I've become a hermit." The word surprised me. To most, 'hermit' is a euphemism for anti-social isolation. I am rediscovering its classic meaning made new by communal contemplative prayer in virtual space. From the centered community of the Keating Chapel sangha, I go out to the people and work I am called to love and serve. What had been a weekly ritual of renewal in faith has become a daily practice of growing awareness: God in me, I in God, all in all. The sangha is my hermitage.

The people in the sangha are not friends. They are not neighbors. But each day in the sangha, those who come make spacious community for all in the chapel. All are companions in that hour; those present strengthen each other in what is often the loneliness of ordinary people developing spiritual lives committed to contemplative prayer. In the 2.5 years of the sangha meeting daily, week after week people remark on the holy transformation at work in their lives. Look: in the sangha and the gatherings in all the online chapels, God is doing something new, and the goodness of that newness is no temporary stop-gap. The results are a great and increasingly acceptable reality of the new economy of God. ☸

Centering Prayer and Autism

DAVID HENDERSON AND ALISON WOOLLEY

Introduction

There is a growing interest across the Centering Prayer (CP) community in mental health in general and autism in particular. This chimes with the growing realisation, certainly in Western society, that mental health is significantly more important to health and wellbeing than has been acknowledged in the past.

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. It is still little understood scientifically. It manifests itself in many different ways, and to many different degrees, for those with the condition.

Often but not always diagnosed in childhood, it can cause difficulties with speech and non-verbal communications, social interaction, sensory sensitivities and behavioural tendencies. Examples are extreme attention to detail and the need for predictable and recurring life routines. It can be accompanied by high degrees of anxiety.

People with autism often outperform others in auditory and visual tasks and can also do better on non-verbal tests of intelligence, often thinking in a visual way. They can also have strong long-term memory skills and a tendency to direct communication. Many have very strong mathematical, computer, musical, and artistic skills. Indeed some folk with autism describe it as their 'super-power'. Autism tends to present differently in women and men.

Regarded by some as a disability, and others as a difference, essentially those with autism have their brains 'wired differently' than those without autism (folk deemed to be 'neurotypical'). This often results in two-way challenges in mutual communication and understanding.

Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) has recently been redefined by neuroscientists to include Asperger

Syndrome (AS) which was previously regarded as a similar but separate 'high functioning' condition. ASC is often described as a 'spectrum' condition. This is because of its wide range of differing characteristics and weight of their presence in each autistic individual. Such is the vast range of possibilities that some are now calling this the 'autism constellation' rather than the 'autism spectrum'. Put in a different way, there is a saying that "If you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person"!

So, how does CP sit with folk who are autistic? That is what the co-authors of this article would like to find out. Alison Woolley and David Henderson are two long-standing CP practitioners who live in the UK. The strong connecting skills of Jill Benet put them in touch with each. As a result they compared notes, discovered a similar interest but with personally different characteristics and agendas, and with Jill's help agreed to put this article together.

There follows:

- Alison's back story
- Alison's issues & questions about CP & autism
- David's back story
- David's issues & questions about CP & autism
- What happens next?

Alison's back story

CP has been a fundamental part of my spiritual discipline/prayer practices since about 2008 when I came across Thomas Keating's paper on Divine Therapy in reading around the subject for my PhD research about contemporary Christian women's engagement with practices of silence-based prayer. I then read his *Open Mind, Open Heart*, quickly followed by some of Cynthia Bourgeault's books, including *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, and

in this exploration CP became my daily, then twice-daily practice. Prior to that I'd tried the Christian meditation mantra practice taught by WCCM for some time but had found the repetitive word itself too intrusive and had given up. I'd also tried using the Jesus Prayer with more success, but ultimately with a similar outcome.

During 24 years of professional life as a music therapist I worked in individual, weekly sessions for a minimum of two academic years each, with well over 50 young people and children with autism. About half were non-verbal but the other half coping in main stream primary schools. Inevitably, I'd had quite a lot of training around autism. However, when my dad died in late 2016 and my mum asked me a few months later what parts of him I thought I'd inherited, I suddenly realised that many of our similarities were also things that had always led me to assume from my training that he was autistic. This realisation begged an obvious question! In 2017, work with a psychotherapist who specialised in autism, along with doing some of the newer tests that take into account how ASC often presents differently in females, clearly indicated that I am autistic, although I have not seen the point in pursuing an expensive diagnosis (test scores of 56% are taken as definitive. I was scoring in the low 80s).

Over the year I've been struck by the often-repeated idea – by Cynthia and others – that CP and nonduality engages a whole different 'operating system'. This mirrors language, however differently meant, about how those on the autistic spectrum run on a different operating system from those who are 'neurotypical' – i.e. those who aren't autistic and have typical neurological brain structures.

This shared language – but obviously used in different contexts to mean very different things – has, however, left me with lots of wonderings about CP, nonduality and autism. It's often said, particularly of females, that people who are autistic are 'spiritually gifted', whatever that might mean to authors/researchers in this field. It's never well defined by them, and those of us who belong to faith communities are perhaps more aware than such authors are of what a contested and problematic term 'spiritually gifted' is. But an extended email exchange in 2020-21 with the Anglican hermit, Martha Reeves – who, under

the nom de plume Maggie Ross, writes extensively about silence and the apophatic in her two volumes of *Silence: A User's Guide* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014 & 2018), and elsewhere – assured me that some others who are deeply engaged in this area also have queries about whether autism might be a factor in the lives of quite a number of the mystics – especially the female ones! I find this intriguing, particularly when viewed alongside a shift in understanding around emotions in the female presentation of autism. Whilst it's repeatedly been stated that people with ASC have difficulty understanding emotions, there is a growing body of thought that many girls and women with ASC are actually hyper-aware of different emotions for themselves and others. The sensory overwhelm and confusion that can result from this hyper-awareness (in contrast to those who are neurotypical, who may have awareness of only the primary, more obvious emotions present) can be misinterpreted by others as an inability to understand emotions at all. But could it be that, rather, some women with ASC are able to harness this enhanced awareness and present as particularly spiritually gifted or literate as a result?

To be honest, there has been so much happening in 'life' over the last few years since I've known that I'm on the autistic spectrum that I haven't engaged with it very deeply beyond my work remit. I've read a good number of books looking specifically at autism in women and girls, some based in qualitative research, but haven't delved deeply into current research nor interrogated how it impacts/intersects with my spiritual journeying beyond my general levels of reflection and reflexivity. I haven't had the time or the energy. But increasingly, I find myself reflecting that it's potentially really important to raise queries around the intersectionality between ASC and CP, along with other similar spiritual practices.

Alison's issues & questions about CP & autism

Those with ASC aren't neurotypical. As far as I can tell all the writing I've read about CP/nonduality makes no distinction about its impact between those who are neurotypical and those who are neurodiverse, like those with ASC (although the term 'neurodiversity' is applied to other diagnoses that fall outside the 'cluster' of autistic conditions). Yet CP is based in practices that neurological research is suggesting

are reconfiguring the neural pathways. I wonder, therefore, whether anyone is or has given thought or done any research into how those who are not neurotypical might encounter CP – or other similar practices – and nonduality differently from the neurotypical community?

There are far too many questions and implications that arise from this basic question for me to list here! Inevitably, encounters and development within the nondual will differ from person to person amongst neurotypicals, as it will from one autistic person to another, but there is clearly a significant amount of commonality of encounter. I would imagine that those with atypical neurological make-up are, similarly, likely to share some commonality in their engagement with CP and the nondual. But given our different neurological 'operating system', some – and perhaps a significant proportion – of these might be quite 'other' from those who are neurotypical. If this continues to go unacknowledged and unaddressed within the CP/nondual communities, then it's quite possible that a lot of confusion at the least and perhaps also pain, struggle, misunderstanding, or even significant damage might result for those who are not neurotypical but who are engaging with texts about practices that are in some ways restructuring neurological connections where it is assumed that all those doing so are neurotypical. Once this is

recognised, articulated and shared within the CP community, as we are doing here, beginning to address this becomes imperative. It's a box that, once opened, can't be shut with integrity.

David's back story

My interest in CP and autism draws from my discovery of CP in 2016, and my diagnosis of AS/ASC in 2017, at the age of 67. These were both hugely important events in the time since my retirement from a workaholic business career in 2010.

Earlier in my life, I was quite a passionate atheist. But, in my mid-30's, I found what I thought was a full Christian faith in an evangelical Anglican church. However, this was a form of rational religious 'head belief' rather than full-spun Christian conviction and faith. And I stayed in my head, Biblically centred, for the next thirty years, as I offered no opportunity for the Holy Spirit to roam unfettered beyond my head. I was also very fixed in many other aspects of my life – work, family and socially.

When I retired, all of a sudden I realised that I'd allowed my working life to distract me from what was really important, just like the tide going out only to reveal many rocks (that I hadn't been aware of) lying on the beach. Simply put, I didn't know who I was – but now really wanted to find out. In short order, my long-suffering wife Anna, plus a Christian counsellor, plus the discovery of a more contemplative Christian life focused on seeking God's presence via CP, combined to set me on a fresh path towards finding out more about myself. And this was capped by my diagnosis as autistic.

Even though Anna sadly died of pancreatic cancer in 2019, the spiritual freedom that I now experience in my prayer life, in my family life with children and grandchildren, in my friendships and in my ecumenical church life is uplifting and hugely encouraging.

I'm curious about autism and I want to find out much more about it. So I'm now involved in an AS self-advocacy group, I'm a lived experience volunteer working with my local UK National Health Service Mental Health Trust research division, contributing to research studies on autism, related co-morbidities and other mental health conditions, and I sit on my County Council's Autism Partnership Board.



My late-in-life diagnosis means that I have lived the vast majority of my life not knowing of my condition. When I found out, it made so much sense of my life to date. But it also helped me realise how much unconscious compensatory change I had made during my life in my thinking, my behaviour and my social interaction to enable me to engage more easily with the world at large. As a result, I think that I am very fortunate in that I relate very easily to others (family, friends, acquaintances and many others) who are not (I think!) autistic. So I'm one of the people who considers my autism as a difference, not a disability.

My specific areas of interest in how CP connects with autism start from the fact that the CP practice has given me such an important way to calm my mind, which is usually like the contents of an overworked washing machine, full of interconnected and random thoughts rushing around in chaotic spins like an overloaded mix of multi-coloured garments. Seeking the presence of God through CP has given me peace of mind and reduced anxiety levels that I have never experienced before, both during sits but also in my wider daily life. This is undoubtedly by far the most important impact of CP on my life. But I'm also keen to learn perhaps a bit more of why this should be, whilst respecting that this gift from God is in itself miraculous, mystical and beyond my understanding.

David's issues & questions about CP & autism

The frequent references that Cynthia Bourgeault makes to the HeartMath Institute and the research that they are doing on the interworking of the heart and the brain, and how these change during times of CP sits and/or meditation are of great interest to me. And I am very excited by a local research project just finishing about reducing anxiety in autistic folk by developing ways to 'listen' to one's heart beating, in the under-researched area of interoception (i.e. awareness of the insides of our bodies) in ways that are akin to The Welcoming Prayer.

Who else in the family of Contemplative Outreach, in addition to Cynthia Bourgeault, has knowledge of, and/or interest in, heart/brain and interoception scientific research as it connects with CP?

How does The Welcome Prayer connect with such research and more general CP practice experience of bodily awareness?

Autistic folk may find it very difficult or impossible to recognise and/or identify feelings. How does the Welcome Prayer work for folk for whom feelings and emotions may be undetectable or unidentifiable?

What Happens Next?

As autistic folk, we are both very aware of how each person with autism presents her/his characteristics very differently. So we don't suggest that our individual experiences and specific interests in aspects of CP will in any way mirror the experiences of any other autistic person.

We hope that in raising these areas for consideration we might begin an ongoing conversation within the CP community that will be fruitful and constructive for everyone if it can be given space to unfold. Inevitably, pursuing it much beyond the starting blocks will necessitate interaction between people who are CP practitioners with autism, those who are neurotypical, and preferably some folk who are CP practitioners who are academics/researchers within the field of ASC: without their specialist knowledge alongside the lived experience of the autistic community we won't get far.

We'd be thrilled to connect with others who would be interested in exploring this further.

So, whether you are autistic (diagnosed or self-diagnosed), professionally or personally involved in autism (e.g., as a carer), personally interested in autism, or have any other link to the subject, and you want to connect with others who are seeking to learn about how CP and autism intersect, please do be in touch with Alison and David. Please indicate your areas of interest and expertise in addition to any responses to the issues we have outlined and the questions we have asked, plus any observations, issues and questions of your own.

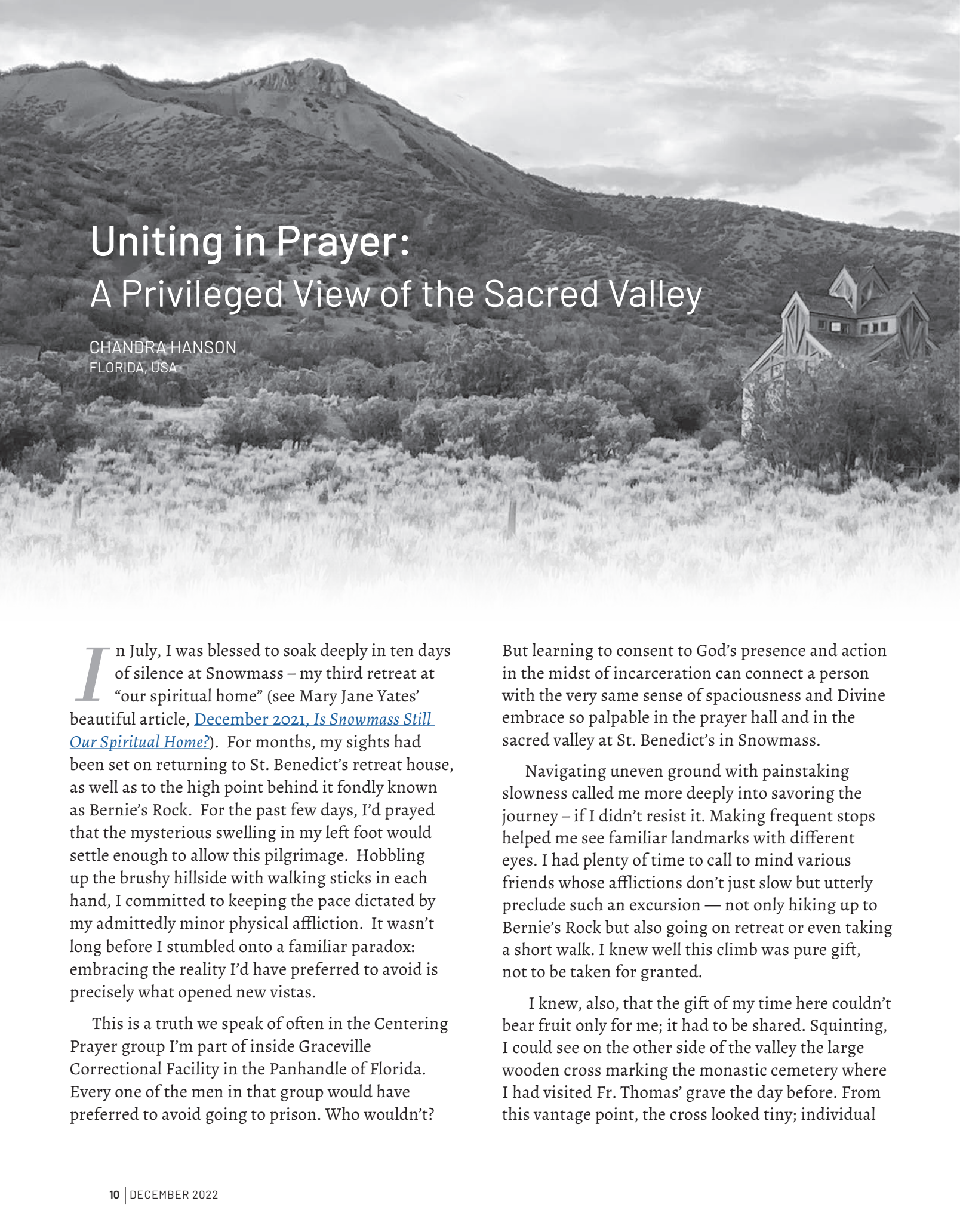
Once we have heard back from folk, we will collate what we have received and share it with this wider group. And, depending upon response, we may suggest possible next steps.

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Thank you! ☸



Uniting in Prayer: A Privileged View of the Sacred Valley

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In July, I was blessed to soak deeply in ten days of silence at Snowmass – my third retreat at “our spiritual home” (see Mary Jane Yates’ beautiful article, [December 2021, Is Snowmass Still Our Spiritual Home?](#)). For months, my sights had been set on returning to St. Benedict’s retreat house, as well as to the high point behind it fondly known as Bernie’s Rock. For the past few days, I’d prayed that the mysterious swelling in my left foot would settle enough to allow this pilgrimage. Hobbling up the brushy hillside with walking sticks in each hand, I committed to keeping the pace dictated by my admittedly minor physical affliction. It wasn’t long before I stumbled onto a familiar paradox: embracing the reality I’d have preferred to avoid is precisely what opened new vistas.

This is a truth we speak of often in the Centering Prayer group I’m part of inside Graceville Correctional Facility in the Panhandle of Florida. Every one of the men in that group would have preferred to avoid going to prison. Who wouldn’t?

But learning to consent to God’s presence and action in the midst of incarceration can connect a person with the very same sense of spaciousness and Divine embrace so palpable in the prayer hall and in the sacred valley at St. Benedict’s in Snowmass.

Navigating uneven ground with painstaking slowness called me more deeply into savoring the journey – if I didn’t resist it. Making frequent stops helped me see familiar landmarks with different eyes. I had plenty of time to call to mind various friends whose afflictions don’t just slow but utterly preclude such an excursion — not only hiking up to Bernie’s Rock but also going on retreat or even taking a short walk. I knew well this climb was pure gift, not to be taken for granted.

I knew, also, that the gift of my time here couldn’t bear fruit only for me; it had to be shared. Squinting, I could see on the other side of the valley the large wooden cross marking the monastic cemetery where I had visited Fr. Thomas’ grave the day before. From this vantage point, the cross looked tiny; individual



United in Prayer Day: March 3-4, 2023



On the Saturday closest to Fr. Keating's birthday (March 7), Contemplative Outreach celebrates United in Prayer Day. 2023 will be the third time this 24-hour prayer vigil is globally hosted via Zoom.

For those who have internet access, Zoom allows virtual connections across the globe – a whole new perspective that opens exciting vistas and possibilities.

This coming spring, the Prison Outreach Service Team invites those who are incarcerated (and anyone else not able to participate virtually) to continue the long-standing practice of participating in what remains, transcendently, the most powerful means of uniting us: the prayer itself.

Send us a letter telling us which hour(s) you'll be praying and in what time zone. We'll pass on your first name and location to the hosts for the hour, letting them know of your participation. We'll also do our best to pass back to you something about the group that's hosting the hour you selected.

**Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.
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graves could not be made out, but that didn't change the fact of their presence. Held in the vastness of the valley, I knew my own fragility and insignificance; I also knew that I was not alone and that my consent to being here, to making this pilgrimage, was far from insignificant. I had commended all my friends to Fr. Keating's care and fulfilled the promise to take pictures of his grave to share. I carried in my heart not only the men in our circle, but all those who are choosing to spend their time of incarceration opening to the transformation God has in store for all of us beloved children.

Scaling the heights to see the whole valley, I found a new and unifying perspective on time as well as space. It hadn't even been five years since CO's 2017 International Conference, to which those sharing the prayer inside locked facilities had been invited along with Ray Leonardini (founder of Prison Contemplative Fellowship). I had spent hours on the phone with Ray (who has mentored many prison volunteers), but this conference was the first time I'd actually met Ray or any of the dozen others in attendance who were taking the prayer inside. Now, largely due to another of those certainly-not-wished-for afflictions (the pandemic), we'd seen the resurrection and growth of CO's Prison Outreach Service Team.

My perspective and experience of our unity in prayer and of the sacred valley have been profoundly shaped by my journey with practitioners of Centering Prayer in prison. We are one Body in Christ and in this prayer. May friends "inside the walls" know that these eyes take in this beautiful reality more fully on account of my journeying alongside you, and may you and all those who are unable to physically travel to Snowmass come to glimpse something more of our spiritual home through these words. ☸



Being Before Doing

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DECATUR, GEORGIA, USA

Thomas Merton begins his prose poem “Hagia Sophia” with a section called “Dawn. The Hour of Lauds.” Speaking as a man lying asleep in bed, he writes of “an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy” that rests, invisible, at the heart of all visible things. This “invisible fecundity” is “Wisdom, the Mother of all,” and “rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being.” At her voice, the sleeping man “[awakens] out of languor and darkness, out of helplessness, out of sleep, newly confronting reality and finding it to be gentleness. . . Love takes him by the hand, and opens to him the doors of another life, another day.” At the conclusion of the next section, “Early Morning. The Hour of Prime,” Merton declares, “The heavenly lights rejoice in the going forth of one man to make a new world in the morning.”¹

The first time I read this, I was struck with curiosity and hope about what it might mean for me to encounter the divine Reality that inhabits all reality at the beginnings of my days. Specifically, what might it do for my relationship with work? For years I’ve had a problem with work. Namely, I don’t like to do it; or at least I have a hard time finishing it. I can make a great start on a project, but I can’t seem to bring it to a conclusion. (Once I even wrote an article about this for a spirituality journal; and I missed the deadline.)²

Reading Merton’s words, it occurred to me that I could move the focus off “work” as an intimidating object that I must accomplish, and onto the person who is to accomplish it. Nothing I can do will be worth doing if I am not the person God made and called to do it, the particular man “going forth . . . to make a new world in the morning.” I must *be* before I can *do*.

But how might this refocusing, this “confronting reality,” take place? I already had a well-established practice of Centering Prayer at the beginning of the day, and it seemed clear that this would be the doorway into that encounter. It has taken me several years (not surprisingly) to get fully serious about this, stimulated in the end by being presented with a now-or-never deadline on a project I had delayed for a very long time. Even before that, though, I had already made progress by deepening my practice through a Contemplative Outreach online course called “[Centering Prayer as a Way of Life](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/CenteringPrayerasaWayofLife).”³

What if (I finally asked myself), before you began to work each day, you first accessed your self—not your biography, but your identity as a Child of God? What if you would really practice “being before doing”? Would your work become, not necessarily easier, but more welcome, more fully a part of your life, in some way more true to the person you are apart from work? In an intense month of meeting a difficult deadline, I found this to be the case.

1 T. Merton, Hagia Sophia, in *In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York, New Directions, 2005, pp. 65–67.

2 D. Rensberger, Addicted to Nothing, *Weavings*, 29:4, August–October, 2014, pp. 41–47.

3 <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/CenteringPrayerasaWayofLife>, accessed May 14, 2021.

In reflecting on my experience in light of my engagement with Thomas Merton and with the work of Contemplative Outreach, it seems to me that the reason why Centering before starting to work makes the work truer and more fruitful is that I am doing it as my genuine self. In Centering Prayer, we consent to God's presence and action, that is, to God's own Being and Doing, within us. The person opening to God in silence in the morning encounters both the reality of the universe—that is, the Christ, the Wisdom at its heart—and their own reality, their authentic identity. "Confronting reality and finding it to be gentleness," they welcome God as God welcomes them. What they encounter is *the divine desire that they should exist and be active*, both in the divine Heart of all that is and in that same Heart within themselves.

Maybe that needs a little unpacking. The Wisdom, the Creative Reality at the heart of the universe, has desired each of us not only to exist, but to exist in a certain way, as a specific person, and then to do the specific things that that person alone is able to do. Our existence derives from that divine Heart, that divine Gentleness. But we also have that same Heart present within ourselves, the divine Image in which we are made; and we consent to that Presence in our Centering Prayer. This consent is also our consent first to be, and then to do.

The divine Heart of all is also the origin of each specific day that we live, with its constellation of events, activities, and experiences, and enables the activities that we will do as ourselves that day, giving the day its particular character. As we consent to God's action within us in morning Centering Prayer, we also consent to the reality that the Wisdom at the heart of all will offer us that day. Our consent to God's presence and action within us also enacts this broader consent, this listening for God's reality within the universe as well as within ourselves.

Based on these insights, I developed a specific routine for the work I had to do. Everyone's circumstances are different, but perhaps a sketch of this may be useful to others as well. I found that I needed several points of discipline in addition to

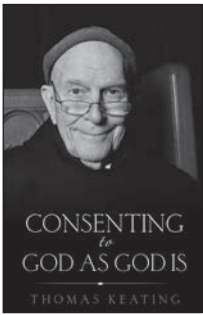
Centering Prayer. I have to go to bed early enough that I can get up early enough to begin a disciplined day. I avoid browsing the news or anything else before my morning prayer, and I avoid email until the afternoon, so as not to lose entire mornings to it. I say Morning Prayer first thing, then do 20 minutes of Centering Prayer. Once I've breakfasted and dressed, I do another 10 minutes of Centering, to access my self and listen for God just before starting work at the computer. After lunch I often find myself drowsy, and I use that low-energy period for email. Then I'll drink a little tea to perk up, and do another full 20 minutes of Centering Prayer before setting back to work.

I've found that I need to think of routines such as exercise, meals, email, etc., not as outside my day's reality, but as further activities that I approach as my true self and do with intention for God. I've also found that not every day is an ideal one: part of consenting to the gentle Reality at the heart of reality is to respond with gentleness when events, whether outside my control or within it, make my day develop "differently."

It takes some courage to just sit, not plan or imagine our work and its results, but just be. I'm blessed that I get to work in solitude at home. People who go somewhere to work and don't have a private space when they get there might take a few minutes in the parking lot just to reestablish contact with themselves, with their actual reality in God, before they go in.

"Being before doing": our work can be better, can have more of reality in it, when we do it as our real selves, as free and whole persons, in contact with the fount and heart of all reality. Self-presentation and the expression of opinions are central parts of most people's lives, especially at work (even if we work alone). Because of this, it is worthwhile to begin the day with a practice that is not about self-presentation but self-recovery, not about opinion but about laying commentary aside. Contemplation is sometimes criticized as being an avoidance of needful activity. But in this practice, contemplation is not work avoidance but work acceptance, because it is first of all *being* acceptance, the acceptance of the person I am who is able and called to do the work that I do. ☸

David Rensberger is a long-time practitioner of Centering Prayer. He is retired from teaching at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, and continues to do research and write on the Bible and Christian spirituality, and other matters. He is a member of the Atlanta Mennonite Church and Oakhurst Baptist Church.

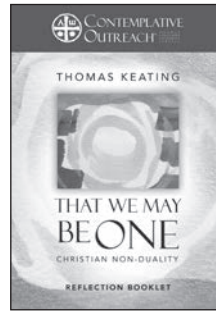


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Thomas Keating

This book is a collection of talks given to Extensión Contemplativa Internacional, the Spanish and Portuguese branch of Contemplative Outreach between 2007-2009. It is addressed primarily to those with some personal experience of the spiritual journey and especially to those engaged in some form of contemplative service. Along

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SAVE THE DATE

The 31st Annual United in Prayer Day March 3-4, 2023

24 hours of continuous prayer
via Zoom

Facilitated from groups and
practitioners from around the globe

[Check the website](#) for more details
as the time draws near



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The practice of Centering Prayer deepens our awareness of the oneness
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