

The Snowmass Agreements

In 1984 Thomas Keating invited a small group of contemplatives from eight different religious traditions - Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Islamic, Native American, Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic – to come together at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, to engage in what he called “a big experiment.” What would happen when meditators from different traditions meditated together and shared their spiritual insights? Within a few days it became clear to attendees that while their religious vocabularies were different, their experiences were not.

During the first few years of the Snowmass Conference, a series of agreements arose among the attendees. Fr. Thomas compiled the first eight:

1. The world religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality, to which they give various names.
2. Ultimate reality cannot be limited by any name or concept.
3. Ultimate Reality is the ground of infinite potentiality and actualisation.
4. Faith is opening, accepting and responding to Ultimate Reality. Faith in this sense precedes every belief system.
5. The potential for human wholeness - or, in other frames of reference, enlightenment, salvation, transcendence, transformation, blessedness - is present in every human being.
6. Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices but also through nature, art, human relationships, and service to others.
7. As long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering.
8. Disciplined practice is essential to spiritual life; yet spiritual attainment is not the result of one's own efforts, but the result of the experience of oneness with Ultimate Reality.

(see *The Common Heart: An Experience of Interreligious Dialogue*, edited by Netanel Miles-Yepetz. And with gratitude to Antonio Benet, UK, for this summary.)

In the afterword to this book, Thomas Keating observes: “Those who seek Ultimate Reality perceive themselves as citizens of the Earth. Their first loyalty is to the entire human family. They transcend the particularities of race, nationality and religion without reacting against them or trying to destroy them. They recognize the profound human values that the world religions enshrine. They work to preserve and enhance these values, but not at the cost of dividing the fundamental unity of the human family. They belong to an emerging global community.” ☸

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Contemplative Outreach in 2022:

Serving the Changing Needs of Christian Contemplatives

Contemplative Outreach is an evolving community with an expanding vision and deepening practice of Centering Prayer that serves the changing needs of Christian contemplatives.

CO Guideline for Service #1



See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

Isaiah 43:19

Now in our 39th year, there is no doubt that Contemplative Outreach (CO) has evolved faster than our wildest imaginations, especially in the three years since the pandemic prompted the widespread use of Zoom to support our growing interconnectedness and collective transformation. Other world events have also prompted this thirst for spiritual healing and nourishment. Ongoing violence, poverty and environmental devastation are calling us to an ever deeper listening to the needs of our community, many of whom were directly affected by these events in 2022. Looking back, we are deeply grateful for the way the Spirit has supported the efforts of so many to share Centering Prayer and its contemplative vision in increasingly diverse and creative ways.

To begin, our CO Service Teams continued their efforts to support global practitioners by hosting online enrichment and training gatherings for commissioned presenters of Centering Prayer, Lectio Divina and the Welcoming Prayer as well as for facilitators of Centering Prayer groups and community leaders. 2022 also saw new volunteers stepping forward to join these Service Teams and we are so grateful for their willingness to say “yes”!

Technology continues to enable broad and deep connections globally. Over 16 million sessions have been initiated on the Centering Prayer mobile app over the last nine years and each month about 350,000 practice sessions occur. The website continues to be the largest and most-used resource for the community: over 191,000 users visited the site from over 200 countries. In an effort to reach younger and more diversified audiences, CO continued to grow our social media presence and our CO YouTube channel now has 25,300+ subscribers and 904 videos. This channel continues to be a primary vehicle for newcomers to find the teachings of Thomas Keating and, thanks to the efforts of our Translation Working Group, the number of viewers accessing videos in languages other than English has increased fourfold in the past two years! 2022 also saw the launch of our new podcast, “Opening Minds, Opening

Hearts,” for both the curious meditator and the experienced practitioner. A total of six episodes were produced and accessed by over 10,000 listeners through podcast platforms with another 6900 listeners tuning in through our own YouTube channel.

Thanks to the Spirit’s leading and the generosity of our donors, 2022 also brought us the opportunity to experiment with new ways of reaching the underserved in our community, including younger contemplatives, people who speak languages other than English, and those who are currently or formerly incarcerated. In June we were pleased to welcome Colleen Thomas as our first ever *Diversity Outreach Coordinator*. Colleen’s focus for the next six months was to identify ‘40s and Under’ Centering Prayer practitioners within our existing community and related partner organizations and to explore the interest of these individuals and groups in forming and nurturing a sub-community of Centering Prayer practitioners. By December, Colleen discerned the need to establish online spaces for both ‘40s and Under’ and BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of colour) persons to gather and build community.

Now in its second year, the *Prison Outreach Service Team* (COPOST) continued to provide much needed networking opportunities and material support to currently and formerly incarcerated individuals in the U.S and the volunteers who serve them. The Outside the Walls prayer group continues to meet and the volunteer mailing list grew to 150. Two formerly incarcerated individuals were hired as data analysts to help get prisoner addresses ready for newsletter mailings, and Team members began exploring avenues for providing written and video content inside the walls. Clearly the Spirit is inspiring ever new and creative ways of reaching this part of our community!

New ways of networking with the international community also emerged. At the prompting of our brothers and sisters in Extensión Contemplativa Internacional, (the Spanish and Portuguese speaking arm of CO), a series of meetings was convened with volunteers from around the world to study the book *Consenting to God As God Is*, and sit together in prayer, Lectio and discernment about how the Spirit may be prompting us to develop our service and ministry to the worldwide Centering Prayer community.

Alongside this development, an online *Global Centering Prayer Presenter Training* was designed in response to the needs of practitioners outside the U.S. who wanted to share the Centering Prayer practice but had no chapter structure to facilitate presenter training in the conventional way. The first cohort was a 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. Another highlight for our international community was United in Prayer Day held for the second time by Zoom to honor Thomas Keating’s birthday on March 7.

*So the sea-journey goes on, and who knows where!
Just to be held by the ocean is the best luck we could have.*

- Rumi

In retrospect, 2022 was a year of great blessing but also a year of learning deeper trust in Fr. Thomas’s invitation of the Divine Economy (“investment in giving everything away”) and the realities of sustaining a non-profit organism post-COVID. Largely due to a \$152,000 loss in investment income, our overall income was down 39.76%. During this uncertain economic time, donations were also down by 14%. On the expense side of the equation, printing, shipping and some contractor prices have increased. And yet as we reflect on the unmistakable graces of 2022, we can only be amazed at the thousand-fold return we have received on the humble and hidden efforts of so many in our community. ☸

A word from the Governing Board: Reading over this report we recognize that these highlights just touch on the many sparkling initiatives of our Centering Prayer community around the world.

The contemplative values of *Silence, Solitude, Solidarity and Service* are manifested as we share the practice of Centering Prayer and work together for the transformation of the human family. Our vision states that “the good accomplished through Contemplative Outreach is the gift of the Holy Spirit.” What a great joy it is to cooperate with this gift of grace.

Tom Carr, Leslie Geer, Phil Jackson, Sharon Junn,
Jim McElroy, Carol Quest and Diane Ryan



Centered Listening

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What follows is what I have learned and observed in many years of Centering Prayer practice and participation in a variety of Centering Prayer groups both inside and outside of prisons and jails.

If we were to distill the method of Centering Prayer to essentials, the end result would probably be minimal. Centering Prayer has often been called a “methodless” method of prayer, eschewing the modern tendency toward techniques intended to gratify some immediate need. But, as Fr. Keating has written, “Centering Prayer is not just a method; it is true prayer, a prayer of consent to God’s presence and action within us.”

In this practice, the sacred word is not a talisman repeated to achieve a particular result (such as a feeling of closeness to God, as if such a thing were real). Rather, the sacred word is “symbol”. What does it symbolize, if not an intention to release our thoughts in order to be open to the experience of the silent language of God. In engaging this prayer in community, we gather with a common intention, to be together a receptacle for God’s creating and healing Self.

How does God’s “self” manifest? Our faith traditions emphasize the inherent goodness – “holiness” – of God. This essence has been infused into humankind, which is made in the image and likeness of God. Part of the journey is learning how to get out of the way of God’s creativity and self-revealing in us, so that it may more effectively show. “The intentionality of faith”, in deepening our participation in the Divine Indwelling, is basic to the journey.

Underlying the relationship of listener and listened-to are two realities, which turn out, in practice, to be only one. The first: The person listened

to is a vessel for the Divine Indwelling. Even though an individual's life is impacted by trauma just from being in the world, basic human nature — beneath the “false selves” — is holy, because it participates in Divine nature. The person listened to is rightly regarded as a manifestation of Divine creation and re-creation. You, the listener, are of the same substance, Divine self-revelation, therefore endowed with the ability to “listen with the ears of love.” Fraternal charity suggests that both listened-to and listener acknowledge the Divine participating with the Divine. The beginning point is consent to the action of the Divine both in listening and being listened to.

It is no surprise that a person cannot achieve this alone. In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the author observes that even the desire to move toward God, to progress in the journey, is itself God's gift to the individual and the Body. Human words are inadequate to capture this Grace, this impetus from the heart of God. But it is unavoidably — eternally — within us. “The chief act of the will is not effort, but consent.” Grace is the Divine presence in all aspects of our lives, especially when we are exercising the personal choice to be open to God's presence and action. One of the fruits of consent is a tendency in ourselves to be more gentle, more self-giving, more forgiving of one's own faults and those of others. Were someone to suggest that you forego that repository of God's aid, in favor of your own spiritual resources, you would rightly reject it as unreasonable and harmful.

During our prayer time, our practice is aided by “the four Rs”: Resist no thought; react emotionally to no thought; retain no thought; and ever so gently return to the symbol of your intention to be open to the Divine. Can we translate those helps into the times when we gather in community? Can these form a framework for a “centered listening” to others, finding its source in the “impetus from God” to be open — in community — to God's presence and action?

- “React” to no statement from another. The initial step in entering into judgment of another — always a hazardous undertaking — is generally a personal reaction to something

said (a trigger). The reaction is often habitual, formed over years of living under the influence of centers for temporary (or “false”) happiness. But if one can interrupt the cycle of reactivity — just for a microsecond — can it interrupt the rush to judgment?

- “Reflect” on no statement. The second step in judgment is to assess or analyze — for validity? For morality? For spirituality? (How does one even come to a criteria?). If I can't avoid the knee-jerk of “reaction”, can I interrupt the process of “reflection”, by intentionally choosing not to evaluate a statement.
- “Respond” to no statement. Most speakers in a centering community want only to be heard, not questioned, or verbally responded to, or disagreed with.
- “Retain” no statement. After the meeting is done, let the comments go. “What happens in group, stays in group.” This is particularly true in emotional unloading which can take place in mature Centering Prayer groups. Carrying someone else's comments around becomes an emotional weight. Sharing in group is meant to be heard, but not memorialized. “Listening in charity” means listening, not writing a history.

None of the foregoing is anything new. Centered listening finds its source in a God which is, first and foremost, unconditional love. The key to our listening with our hearts is an intention to be open to the Divine Indwelling in a particular space and time. It is simply getting out of the way of God's participation. Can we listen in a silence from our own thoughts, to enable Grace?

Centered listening is not Centering Prayer, but it can be one of its fruits. In prayer, we release our thoughts so that we may more fully listen to the Divine silence which is God's first language. In listening, we release parts of our false selves, so that we may more fully be present to another, who is a manifestation of the Divine in that space and time. ☸

Soul-Friending in a Centering Prayer Group

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Introduction

In December 2019, St. Leonard's Centering Prayer (CP) group¹ in Toronto, Canada, started a soul-friending pilot project with six participants. This project was so clearly successful in deepening our spiritual lives that, in September 2020, twelve more of our CP group members came forward and formed two further groups of six. All these groups continue. We found this practice so fruitful and transformational that we want to let other Centering Prayer groups know about it – hence this article.

“Soul-friending” in this article is equal-to-equal with a hyphen to distinguish it from other forms of “soul friending” (no hyphen) mentioned in Cherry Haisten's article in this newsletter issue. For example, “soul-friending” differs from traditional individual spiritual direction in which the director and the directee have different and unequal roles.

An important advantage of equality is that all participants can be soul-friends with one another in a mutual way. No special training or experience is required since a “spiritual friend”... while still searching and spiritually immature, can offer support, empathy, perspective ... What is needed is not saintliness but honesty, compassion, good common sense, and the ability to listen.”² Much more important

than training and qualifications is commitment to the spiritual journey. As Fr. Thomas puts it: “*Motivation is everything in the spiritual journey.*”³

Deepening Spiritual Journeys

A major benefit of soul-friending is its ability to deepen soul-friends' spiritual journeys, and their relationships with each other and with God.

In soul-friending, we seek to place everything that we are and do as far as possible under the direction of Spirit. “*The Spirit is above every method or practice.*”⁴ Discerning and embracing God's will is an integral part of soul-friending: “*Sacred friends ... help each other discern and embrace God's will. But God's will for us is never that we simply comply with God's desires. God's will is that we surrender to Divine love.*”⁵ Soul-friends help each other surrender to Divine love.

Soul-friends also help each other on the journey of heartfulness: “*The purpose of our lifetime is to provide us with the space for the upward journey of evolution into the mind, heart and whole being of God, or the Ultimate Reality. Fr. Thomas calls this the journey of heartfulness.*”⁶

Soul-friends support each other in letting go into “contemplative prayer [in] its full development under the direct inspiration of the Spirit.”⁷

Contemplative prayer anchors the practice of soul-friending and builds inner stillness and attunement to Spirit. It also provides a sense of communion between soul-friends.

Soul-friends seek to be as authentic as possible. “*Presence to another person ... is not playing a 'spiritual friend' role. It is simply being fully my authentic self and setting this self aside ... [so that] I can receive another person.*”⁸

Companionship, Support, and Encouragement on the Spiritual Journey

Another major benefit of soul-friending is its ability to provide companionship on the spiritual journey. Fr. Thomas emphasized the need for this: “*Centering Prayer is totally in the service of sustaining us in a transforming process which is anything but secure, easy, or certain ... How can we ... [make] the rich contemplative tradition available in our day with the ... support system that will enable contemporary people to pursue the journey to the end?*”⁹

When members of a Centering Prayer group choose to form one or more soul-friending groups, this complementary practice adds substantially to the companionship and support they already receive from their Centering Prayer group. Members of a soul-friending group

1 Meeting over Zoom, St. Leonard's Centering Prayer group continues with this name even though St. Leonard's Anglican Church had its final service in February 2023.

2 Gerald May, *Will and Spirit*, HarperOne, 1982, p. 292

3 Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God*, Crossroad, 2009, p. 138

4 Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, Continuum, 2006, pp. 164-165

5 David Benner, *Sacred Companions*, IVP, 2002, p. 57, Edited for gender neutrality.

6 Thomas Keating and Betty Sue Flowers, *Heartfulness*. Contemplative Outreach Ltd, 2010, back cover

7 Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, op. cit., p. 1

8 David Benner, op. cit., p. 51

9 Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God*, op. cit., pp. 133-134

“encourage one another and build up each other” (1 Thessalonians 5: 11). In addition to their time together in their soul-friending group, members often meet each other one-on-one to listen, share, discern, and pray together.

Support is particularly important in difficult times, for example: in keeping going on the journey, and in navigating challenging situations, including the emergence of the hidden parts of our personalities.¹⁰

Intimacy in a soul-friending group builds over time through “the mutual disclosure of thoughts, feelings, problems, and spiritual aspirations which gradually develops into spiritual friendship ... The experience of intimacy with another or several persons expands and deepens our capacity to relate to God and to everyone else.”¹¹ This intimacy grows organically and naturally over time. There is no forcing here. We each share at the level that we are comfortable with sharing. A positive, self-reinforcing circle works by God’s grace to transform all members of the group: a deeper level of spiritual friendship deepens our relationship with God and with others, which – in turn – deepens our level of spiritual friendship.

In soul-friending we also share the power of grace in community: “A circle of soul companions with whom you can share the unimaginable power of grace is mystical community at its best.”

¹² In addition, we help each other to manifest the seven gifts of the Spirit and their corresponding virtues.¹³

Organizational Aspects

Our CP group, with approximately fifteen regularly attending via Zoom, continues to serve as the foundation for our three soul-friending groups. Our soul-friending groups provide participants with time for more prayer together and more in-depth sharing. A number of our soul-friending group members belong to more than one group. Without this duplication, the total number in our soul-friending groups is 12.

CP group members who have chosen not to participate in a soul-friending group have made that decision mostly because of other commitments or poor health. CP group members who are not members of a soul-friending group nevertheless benefit from the deepening energy that flows from the soul-friending groups. One of the CP group members who was not part of our pilot project attested to this benefit:

“For over ten years I have attended sessions with the CP group at St. Leonard’s Anglican Church. It was not until the recent soul-friending pilot project was introduced to our group that I experienced a definite dramatic shift in the depth of communications with some of the members who had experienced the pilot project. The mutual feeling of having been in touch with the rewards of the project seemed to further enhance a greater bond between these members. Added to this was also the joy in the gifts of these experiences and greater bonds.”¹⁴

Manageable meeting length and group size are important for soul-friending groups to be

effective. A combination that works well for us is two-hour monthly meetings with a group size of 4-6.

Sharing roles helps all members feel that they are contributing to the group. In our soul-friending meetings, members usually volunteer to take roles in the next meeting, e.g., facilitating, presenting, leading Centering Prayer, and giving the closing blessing.

Our soul-friending meetings seek to conform with Contemplative Outreach guidelines, including: *The Living Flame Small Group Covenant Guidelines*¹⁵ and guidelines in the *Centering Prayer Group Facilitator Support service team brochure*.¹⁶

In Conclusion

From the start, soul-friending felt to me like a Spirit-led gift. Without the Spirit beneath our wings, I do not believe we could have started our pilot project so quickly. We had our first pilot project meeting only 49 days after the idea of soul-friending came up between two members of our CP group. And progress was rapid from there, despite hurdles like the onset of COVID.

The inner journey felt even more important. It humbled me many times, bringing me more into my heart and strengthening my connection with myself, others, and with God. I think this has been the experience of everyone in our Centering Prayer group.

I highly recommend the practice of soul-friending to other Centering Prayer groups. ☸

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37

¹¹ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, op. cit., p 162

¹² Caroline Myss, *Entering the Castle*, Atria, 2007, p. 194

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_gifts_of_the_Holy_Spirit


¹⁴ St. Leonard’s Centering Prayer Soul-Friending Pilot Project Final Report, Appendix 3, final paragraphs

¹⁵ https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/lf_program_guidelineswithtablecontents.pdf

¹⁶ <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/FacilitatorSupportServiceTeamBrochure-Final-2022-02.pdf>

Reflecting on Soul Friending in Contemplative Outreach

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A large flock of birds, possibly seagulls or terns, is shown in flight over a light-colored, hilly landscape. The birds are scattered across the upper half of the image, creating a sense of movement and freedom. The background is a soft, pale blue and white gradient.

A “kindred spirit.” That’s what Anne of Green Gables calls her soul friend. When her adoptive mother Marilla asks what in the world a kindred spirit is, Anne explains, “a bosom friend—an intimate friend . . . to whom I can confide my innermost soul. I’ve dreamed of meeting her all my life.”

A kindred spirit shares a similar perspective on life, the human condition, and the world. With a spiritual connection beyond words, a kindred spirit longs for something more than superficial acquaintance.

Like Anne, we may long for a kindred spirit all our lives. Sometimes one may appear when least expected—a cosmic gift. Sometimes we may need to be proactive and actually search for one or put ourselves in situations or circumstances in which it’s more likely we might find one—or many, such as in a Centering Prayer group.

The web of Contemplative Outreach is full of kindred spirits. I don’t know about you but for much of my young life I felt like a misfit, a stranger in a strange land. From the time I heard Thomas Keating speak three decades ago and started attending Contemplative Outreach workshops and events, I felt at home, among kindred spirits. We came from different denominations, even different religions, different parts of the country, the continent, or the world, different social backgrounds and cultures. Yet we all shared a desire for life lived deeper than the surface crust of our awareness and for a deeper relationship with the Divine. We even shared a “contemplative” sense of humor, different from the humor of the workplace or of popular culture. Knowing others shared the values and desires I believed were idiosyncrasies gave me tremendous comfort, encouragement, and hope that journeying on the road less travelled was a viable, maybe even a joyful, option.

The sense of being among kindred spirits in the Contemplative Outreach community attests to the deep bonding that takes place in silence, even in an enormous circle praying

together in a conference room, on Zoom or among a large group of retreatants in a chapel. In those settings, plunging into a soul friending heart-to-heart, or even engaging in an extended chat, is not possible, yet we may leave feeling a strong connection with many kindred spirits. We may recognize these kindred spirits as soul friends.

Through the experience of Centering Prayer in groups, we learn that words are not always necessary to form connections. Still, at times, we may want to share from our particularity and be known in a way that requires words. Soul friending with one other person or a small group provides the opportunity for intimate sharing, for allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, and for baring our souls.

Soul friending was a part of Centering Prayer retreats from the beginning. Beloved retreat leader Pat Johnson recalls that at first Thomas Keating did everything—gave all the presentations, led the prayer times, and served as “spiritual director” to each of the retreatants. He viewed his role as more along the lines of what we today would call a soul friend—someone who, as he said, would:

Listen a lot,
Encourage a lot,
Sit in silence,
Say little or nothing.

In other words, LESS is more in contemplative soul friending.

Within the Contemplative Outreach network, the terms soul friending and spiritual direction are often used interchangeably. Closer in meaning than many words we consider synonyms, the terms share characteristics with each other and with similar terms like spiritual companioning or spiritual friendship. All point to a way of being with each other that involves receptive, non-judgmental, penetrating listening, “listening for God together.” It’s often said that the true director in the relationship is the Holy Spirit.

*“Where two or three are gathered together in my name,
there am I in the midst of them.”*

MATTHEW 18:20

Spiritual direction is typically one-on-one, between a “directee” and a director who has training either as a clergy person, a religious, or in one of many spiritual direction programs available. In a typical relationship, the directee does most of the talking. The director listens, asks questions (like “Where is God in all this?”), shares insights, and may give advice or illustrations from her own life experience. The direction of the relationship is not mutual; there is no taking turns or switching roles.

Soul friending can be anything from two kindred spirits in a completely informal relationship to a structured group with a trained leader, with many variations in between. Facilitators of ongoing Centering Prayer groups may serve as soul friends to members of the group, and, of course, group members can serve as soul friends to each other—within the whole group or one-on-one outside the group. The work on group spiritual direction done by Rosemary Dougherty of Shalem Institute resembles what we in Contemplative Outreach might refer to as soul friending in a group.

*“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up,
just as in fact you are doing.”*

1 THESSALONIANS 5:11

Spiritual direction can and does play a role in the life of many contemplatives on the journey. Thomas Keating asserts that what Centering Prayer practitioners need is companions who are good listeners and who “know how to give plenty of reassurance.”¹ He envisioned more egalitarian friendships developing in Centering Prayer groups in which participants could offer “spiritual direction” for each other as soul friends. “The fundamental work of a spiritual director of contemplatives is to encourage and to guide them to submit to the Divine Therapy, which allows the unconscious emotional material of early life that led to the drive for security, esteem and affection, and power symbols in the culture to be evacuated.”² He was concerned that not just any spiritual director would understand the particular journey of someone on the Centering Prayer path. Without their own contemplative practice, a spiritual

1 *Intimacy with God* Chapter 10, “The Spiritual Direction of Contemplatives,” 104.

2 Thomas Keating, Saturday of the Fourth Week in Lent, “Divine Guidance” p. 81. Also in CO News, Vol 11, No. 1, Summer 1997, “Spiritual Direction, Part II

director might not have a topographical map to follow the twists and turns and bumps and potholes in a contemplative's spiritual road. A dark night might easily be misinterpreted as depression or psychosis, and the directee steered on an inappropriate or even harmful detour.

So, for contemplatives, more important than being directed is being encouraged—not to lose heart during difficulties, not to believe that you're "doing it wrong," not to think it's impossible to fit in a single period of prayer a day, let alone two—but rather to stay the course. Thomas Keating recognized that a "Centering Prayer support group that has been meeting for some time can often provide this kind of encouragement better than a director."³ A Centering Prayer group may provide the listening, understanding, and attunement to the subtle leadings of the Spirit that a contemplative needs. Fr. Thomas hoped that all Centering Prayer groups could grow and mature into such companionship.

To be a soul friend does not require any special instruction or any particular training or course of study. Rather it requires commitment to the prayer and serious study and understanding of the contemplative spiritual journey, particularly as laid out in Fr. Keating's books and videos. It requires receptivity and utmost charity. It requires the ability and willingness to consent to God's presence and action within oneself and in the other or others in the soul-friending relationship. It requires willingness to let go of one's need to speak or make a point, to put one's own agenda aside and ultimately to let go of it completely. It requires dismantling the false self and submitting to God's transformation, growing in Spirit and in spiritual maturity.

With no special training, Pat Johnson recalls feeling unprepared when Fr. Keating first called upon her to serve as a soul friend in addition to her other roles at retreats. Circumstances prompted him to entrust the role he had played to Pat and others several years into the retreat program at Snowmass when he could not himself serve. What these retreat servers had instead of a certificate or a degree was a lot of Centering Prayer practice. They themselves were on the journey and equipped to serve as peer counselors and encouragers.

Pat says that all that was required was to be one step ahead of the retreatant, to have been on the road a little longer, in order to reassure them that they were on the right footing. Yes, this path is a little rocky but if you take your time, you can make it!

Since then, Pat and others have served countless retreats at Snowmass and elsewhere as soul friends. Her "walks-and-talks" were opportunities for retreatants to bare their souls, to reveal innermost thoughts and feelings, to confess to doubts and difficulties in prayer and in life, all with a kind, compassionate, and wise listener. Sometimes when the snow was deep those walks-and-talks became "sits-and-chats." I remember once having a soul friending session with Pat in the front seat of her van. Many retreat leaders have carried on the tradition—on walks or in quiet, private places where the sharing can remain confidential—and they will continue to do so as long as Contemplative Outreach retreats are offered.

Initiatives regarding the place and practice of soul friending and/or group spiritual direction have popped up in various chapters of Contemplative Outreach, for example, in New York City, Florida, and Canada. In Toronto, a Centering Prayer group launched a soul-friending pilot project in late 2019 with a sub-group of its members. An article in this issue by Roddy Duchesne on behalf of these groups provides further details.

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

JOHN 15:12

Soul friending is more than just a casual chat from time to time. Soul friending can be cultivated, nurtured, and lived into intentionally through formation, transmission, and practice. It can become a gift of deep listening and encouragement within existing Centering Prayer groups or in new groups or subgroups established for this purpose. Participants might experience benefits, or fruits, within the group meeting, but as with Centering Prayer, the fruits are often experienced in daily life rather than confined to the time of practice. The way we listen to each other in soul friending can spill over into our daily lives and into all our relationships so that we may become true friends of the soul—seeing Christ in others and loving others as Christ loved us. ☸

Journey Into Silence: *A Personal Discovery*

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I met Jesus when I was barely into my 20's; it was lovely at first, in the truest sense of the word. Love was all around, easily accessed; caring and truth were there as well. Then, through a series of interactions with other humans—some with the best of intentions—things started getting confusing. I wasn't sure how to communicate with Jesus. I wasn't sure what to make of the trinity and other doctrines that seemed to have more variation than agreement among these people. I tried to “hang up” on Jesus more than a few times, saying goodbye, saying “please don't bother me anymore,” but the dude kept calling me back, insisting on caring about me, if nothing else. I was taught to pray by asking for things: heal my mom, get me this job, etc. I felt unheard and certainly did not experience any fruit from this effort.

Then the people with not so good intentions got involved; I was arrested and hauled off to jail. I didn't understand why, despite my very, very, in-depth soul searching. Fear and confusion ensued; no more were the love, caring and truth available. The incarcerated environment was horrific. I ran terrified to the clinically named “Religious Services”, attending anything that seemed remotely helpful. That didn't go too well either. Doctrine was everywhere, judgement was the rule, hate was dominant. I didn't know what to do. I signed up for the Zen Buddhist meditation ‘class’ mostly out of curiosity and a little bit of desperation.

In the quiet, I recognized that the truth was back, kind of lonely, but it was real. I also realized that over the decades I had learned to quiet my mind, using activities like bicycling and guitar workouts to quiet my false self.

The Buddhists were very helpful, telling me repeatedly that “if you are a Christian this practice will help you be a better one.” At the same time, there were copies of Bo Lozoff's book *We're All Doing Time* in the library—very practical advice on developing a meditative/contemplative practice inside the walls. The Human Kindness Foundation (born out of his writings and experiences) was responsive and caring. The caring was back, along with the truth. What about the love?

Patience, silence, more patience, more silence. As I observed myself changing, I realized that I didn't need those parts of me that were causing so much trouble. I began to let go of the depression, anger, fear, loneliness. Finally, a day came when I realized it was love that was helping me change. Truth was necessary, caring was necessary, but love is what makes you understand that you are important: if God loves me, I must be worthwhile. I learned to listen rather than talk. I learned that what I heard was beyond truth and caring; it was love—the most powerful love we know. It was that dude Jesus calling again.

This time, I listened instead of talking. This time, I could hear. This time, what I heard was a way to accept his love, and in that I learned a way to love myself.

Into my life came Rita and Robert, two volunteers at the facility in which I was incarcerated. They led a group that supported all kinds of meditative practice, including the practice of Centering Prayer. I learned about Thomas Keating, the originator of the practice. I learned of groups in other prisons, like Folsom, that were having success. I learned that others were practicing, as I was, finding God in the silence, hearing truth, and transforming their lives. I was past 60 years of age and for the first time there was true joy in living. I learned to experience what Rita once called the “indwelling of the spirit.” I was saved! From myself, I stress, but saved nonetheless.

My release came and went. It wasn't easy returning to society, recreating a life. Tiny details that you took for granted over the years became larger than life: banking, shopping, driving, all became obstacles, taking a lot of time. Sometimes my practice suffered.

Then, I was introduced to a Centering Prayer Zoom group called Outside The Walls, made up of people who had experienced incarceration from one perspective or another, with participants across the U.S. One thing led to another, and we had an opportunity to participate in the United in Prayer day, a 23-hour Zoom prayer vigil with participants around the world. I helped with some of the tech issues and was privileged to “ring the bell” to start our prayer session. At that point, 186 people/small groups, from Germany to Australia were participating. That “bell” was heard around the world. I was moved to tears by the knowledge that the body of practitioners covered the globe! Not only did God love me but an important slice of humanity was on board as well. I was not alone—a moment of transformation I had never before experienced.

I continue my journey into silence. ☸

Spiritual Homelessness: Part of the Invitation?

OUTSIDE THE WALLS PRAYER GROUP

Our Outside the Walls (OTW) Centering Prayer group is blessed by a powerful experience of unity in diversity. We offer a perspective as Contemplative Outreach prayerfully supports the changes happening for the monks at St. Benedict's monastery.

- For some in our group, the spiritual journey has been fueled by the lived experience of incarceration, encouraging us to press into new realms of spiritual freedom precisely in and through the stripping of physical freedom; others of us have been richly blessed to

travel as volunteers alongside those affected by incarceration.

- Some were privileged to meet and pray with Thomas Keating years ago while in prison (and/or to have interacted with monks at St. Benedict's); others know Fr. Thomas and the monastic community only through books and videos, having been mentored and introduced to Centering Prayer by others, one another, Ray Leonardini (Prison Contemplative Fellowship), or other prison outreach volunteers.
- Some of us have visited the sacred valley; others not.
- All are keenly aware of/impacted by the trauma accompanying the current United States criminal justice system. We meet weekly online for support and companionship because we have tasted, to different degrees and in different ways, the transformation that is the fruit of this practice.

Our reflection begins, continues and ends with gratitude.

Had the monastic community at Snowmass not encouraged and supported Fr. Thomas' call to share what became known as Centering Prayer outside the monastic enclosure, none of us would be who we are today, nor would our group exist. We are filled with deep gratitude for not only Fr. Thomas but also Abbot Joseph Boyle, all brothers at the abbey, and an Order that allowed such an innovative way of living the Cistercian vocation – as well as for Contemplative Outreach, Ltd., the Colorado chapter, and the entire community.

Although our individual connections to this living organism may vary, we understand that each of us who practices Centering Prayer is part of this international community. Our OTW group is but a small part of the Body, certainly not the nervous system and perhaps even, in St. Paul's words, one of the "less honorable" parts (see 1 Corinthians, chapter 12). We celebrate and affirm the respect due every part.

In January 2023, a handful of us were able to make a retreat at Snowmass, with members of Contemplative Outreach's Prison Outreach Service Team (COPOST). The participants included those formerly-incarcerated, and those not. It became clear that our differences, the details of our personal histories, were superficial and not so important as the deeper realities which we shared then and now. A new adventure began in each of our lives. We spent seven days in silence and sharing and living in love, not only for one another but also for the awesome valley and nature available to open one's heart. It changed all of us in many ways. We experienced what Mary Jane Yates described in *Is Snowmass Still Our Spiritual Home?* (December 2021): "[t]he sacredness of Snowmass valley is apprehended by the sacredness within, cultivated by a rhythm of prayer."

On retreat we were able to go deep within. Some experienced serious unloading and growth. The extended time in silence was new to those of us who had never had the opportunity to attend such retreats. We quickly found an appreciation for the beauty of this sacred valley. It deepened our sense of connection to God. One

commented that it was easier to let go of thoughts into the vast open view out the prayer room window. We remain deeply grateful for the blessings given to us during this week of prayer, sharing, contemplation, and personal renewal.

Members of our group come to Centering Prayer with a unique perspective. Having committed crimes and/or served time and/or participated as a participant or sponsor/volunteer in a prison setting, each of us has been touched by the toxic quality of prison life. Prison was never a controlled place; rather, it was structured chaos. Snowmass, like prison, was a powerful experience in “letting go and letting God” – more intensely than day-to-day practice. Prison is loud and noisy, not the quiet, isolated existence popularly portrayed. The noise continues twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; one has to learn to tap into the silent place in one’s own being. Do words exist to explain the difference of those worlds (the chaos of prison and the peace of Snowmass)? Both invite radical detachment. For those of us on the retreat it was a blessing of love and nature and, for many, the fulfillment of a dream — a dream shared by Fr. Thomas.

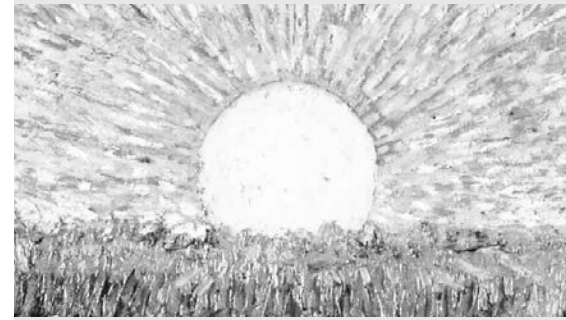
The retreat also created an inexplicable bond within our Outside the Walls group. Not all were physically present, but the blessings experienced by those who went to Snowmass overflowed to those who could not attend. The whole of the body benefited from the personal participation of some. Many of us have learned to look for ways to be of service and to participate in as many healing opportunities as possible. Some call this “paying it forward.” It is a special memory shared by those who were blessed to be part of retreats in this wonderful place.

We intentionally give thanks for the blessing of interconnectedness and unity.

We also join others who are filled with gratitude for St. Benedict’s Monastery in asking the question: If, as the 10th Guideline for Contemplative Outreach Service names the monastery as our spiritual home, does the closing of the monastery leave us spiritually homeless? The physical treasures of Snowmass are unique: the spaciousness and beauty of the sacred valley; the hermitages, guest rooms, and prayer hall; the interaction with the monks; the peace, love and joy created by the energy of all who have prayed and retreated there. The fact that Thomas was laid to rest there creates a connection for many. For those fortunate to have made a retreat in the valley sanctified by the presence of the monks, our fond memories will always harken us back to that very special time and place.

If Snowmass can be considered something of a “garden of Eden” for Centering Prayer, the closing of the monastery might feel like expulsion from the garden. But perhaps it is also in some way the next stage of growth for our CO organism. Are we being invited to embrace freedom from attachments – even to Snowmass? It won’t be the same. The loss of Snowmass is significant. Can it be replaced? Not for many of us, for Snowmass will always hold a special place in our hearts.

Can we move on? The practice calls us to do so. Does the contemplative lifestyle call us to be “homeless”, vagabonds in union with the Divine and each other? Do graces accompany a detachment from places and things, in favor of deeper connection to each other? Can we eschew emotional security in favor of something more eternal? ☸



COPOST is forming a Speakers Bureau!



If your chapter or Centering Prayer group would like to know more about what it is like to go inside a prison to introduce Centering Prayer and the profound and transformative effect Centering Prayer has on those experiencing incarceration, please contact us.

We are happy to attend your Zoom meeting and share about our outreach inside locked facilities. (All speakers will have lived and/or volunteered inside the walls.)

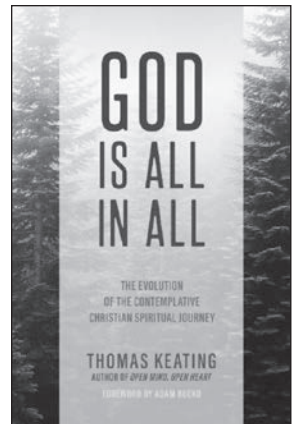
If this piques your interest, send an email to centering@cpprisonoutreach.com with "Speakers Bureau" in the subject line.
Thanks!

God is All in All by Thomas Keating with new foreword by Adam Bucko

This book is an edited transcript of a keynote talk given at the 2012 Annual Conference of Contemplative Outreach in Snowmass, Colorado. In July of 2018, from his place of transition at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, Fr. Thomas gave his permission for the editors to edit and publish his talk in book form. Fr. Thomas challenges and engages us with his teachings and the vastness of their range:

- 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...

[\\$18 USD](#). A digital PDF version is also available from an earlier publication. [\\$13 USD](#).



This teaching by Fr. Thomas is also available in various formats, which include bonus teachings by Abbot Joseph Boyle and David Frenette. [\\$25 USD DVD](#), [\\$19.95 USD mp4](#), [\\$12 USD mp3](#)

OTHER RESOURCES



This podcast series, *Opening Minds, Opening Hearts*, is entering its second season. All episodes are available on podcast streaming platforms (Apple Music, Spotify, Amazon Music, Google Play) and on our CO YouTube Channel.

Guests share insights about the teachings of Thomas Keating and how the practice impacts their work in the world. More information is also on our website here:

<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/podcast>



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

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

- ***Reawakening to the Contemplative Dimension of Life* (54 min):**
Fr. Thomas gave this talk in 2010 at a Circle of Friends retreat at Snowmass.
- **Search under the Playlists tab for more video series**



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Please send your comments, suggestions and content submissions to Pamela Begeman, pamela@coutreach.org

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**Deep gratitude to the board of Praestolari
for generously funding the production,
printing and distribution of
this issue of the CO NEWS.**

Praestolari, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) that fosters life-giving,
wall-transcending contemplative communities
for growth in freedom.

We are currently developing a program to assist
soon-to-be-released individuals seeking to carry
and be carried by their contemplative practices
as they transition.

If you are currently incarcerated,
have a projected release date between Jan 1 and
June 30 of 2024, and would like to participate,
please send a letter describing

- (a) your current contemplative practices, and
- (b) what you would hope for from such a program to:

Praestolari
1700 N Munroe St., Ste 11-281
Tallahassee, FL 32303

Those with internet access can find us at
www.praestolari.org
(or by email: hello@praestolari.org).

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Following the teaching of Jesus, we endeavor to exercise leadership
in a spirit of service, utmost charity, and unity.

CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE #13