

God as Always Becoming

When one moves in prayer from the struggle with letting thoughts go to a diminishing of thoughts and finally a diminishing of our awareness that we're actually praying, that we're the ones who are receiving this developing peace ... the prayer of quiet in which there's a sense of God's presence moves into pure consciousness in which there is no reflection on self. Then this unity with "That Which Is" reaches, at least temporarily, a certain fulfillment that is an experience or an anticipation of what heaven is, which is primarily a state of consciousness ... The essence is this: to be in the house of God, that is to say, to be in the wave that is always

cresting, that is always active, that is always moving, that is always increasing, that is always becoming. As [Raimon] Panikkar puts it, *being is becoming*. And so to think of God as always becoming in and through the creation God made is not to diminish in any way God's transcendence because God remains always at the same time changeless and changing, because God is identified with all creatures who are changing. God has to change. God knows what they're doing and it's different than what they did yesterday.

The rational mind cannot say two things at the same time that are opposite. So the resolution of opposites is only in God where everything is one and diverse at the same time and indeed infinitely one and infinitely diverse. So, if we say there is a God you have to be willing to say in another sense there isn't a God. Meaning there is not a God that we can conceive of that is God. So the uncreated experience of God, this is really the essence of heaven. It's a state of consciousness more than a place ... a spiritual state of consciousness in which we're always aware of being intimately in the house of God. ☸

Thomas Keating, *Gifts for Living* video segments, #71 and #74

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Not an Ideo-logical Center

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I am Italian and was born and raised in a rather unusual environment. My parents and most people around me were not Catholics, but atheists, very politically minded, and highly sensitive to social issues. I thoroughly imbibed their ideas and sentiments and became politically active at a very young age. Our view of Christianity was that it stood in the way of true progress, and the only good thing we could say about it was that Jesus was a leftist. Apart from that, we pitied those “dumb” Christians.

This all changed when I had a near death experience (NDE). It was a total reset. Upon returning to my body I felt thoroughly humbled. All my previous ideas appeared as nothing, as extremely short sighted and shallow. From then on it was very difficult to engage with any ideology or party line, on any side. I had seen the “big picture”, so to speak, and everything else looked kind of “dumb”, the same as I used think about religion.

A year later I converted to Christianity and two years after I went on to be a missionary in Asia. While there, I was faced with a whole new set of political, religious and ethnic “party lines”; they reached intensities I had never seen before and often flared into violence. I saw it while living in the contested territories of Kashmir; while traveling through the tribal areas of Pakistan, and while working in Afghanistan. When mortar shells fell near our house, in Kabul, I moved to Iran and soon found myself in the midst of an Islamic revolution. Some years later I returned to India, and I was there when Indira Gandhi was assassinated by one of her bodyguards. For a few days, mobs went around on a vengeful frenzy, lynching anyone belonging to the same ethnic-religious group as the bodyguard.

As the Berlin Wall began to crumble, I moved to Eastern Europe. There was a sort of revolution going on there, fueled by a mix of anticommunist feelings and nationalistic fervor. Eventually, it resulted in the redrawing of many borders, such as the reunification of Germany, the separation of Czechia and Slovakia and, most painfully, the complete breaking up of Yugoslavia. This last one became a horrendous

war of neighbor against neighbor. As a volunteer, I visited refugee camps and saw firsthand the effects of ethnic, religious and political hatred. A few years later I saw the same thing also in Israel and the occupied territories.

I now live in Finland, just a few kilometers from the Russian border. Some years ago, I enrolled in a language course, and discovered that most of my classmates were either Russian or Ukrainian. At the time I couldn't tell them apart because they all spoke Russian with each other. Many of us became friends and would hang out together, but things got difficult when the Maidan (Kiev) uprising of 2014 intensified. As things got violent, I notice that some of the Ukrainians had contrasting views on what was happening, and I soon learned why.

One day, it all came to a boil, and all because our young teacher decided to show us the Finnish news as language practice. That day, it was all about the Maidan uprising and, unaware of the complexity of the matter, she just thought that it was an unbiased report on current events. As I watched, I knew there would be trouble, and as soon as the news ended, the Ukrainian students stood up in a heated argument with each other. The poor teacher had not anticipated such a reaction and was unable to quell the argument until a “neutral” party suggested that we just forget the news and return to our regular class, to which everyone agreed.

But why am I writing all this, and how does it relate to our Centering Prayer practice? Simply, Centering Prayer leads us to our center, which is not an ideological or sentimental center, derived from the careful and well-informed balancing of opposite views and narratives. The center that we speak of is that of origin, of a “big picture”, so far beyond ideologies, sentiments, and even language, that we are forced to refer to it with such terms as silence, mystery, Cloud of Unknowing or Christ in us. And it is only from that center that the warring factions of this world appear in their true relation to the whole. Only from such seeing can we then find grace to forgive reality for being as it is, and say, *“Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* Only then, can we truly be peacemakers.

And I don't say this because I have attained such lofty levels of spiritual maturity and detachment. Not at all! I still have my opinions, but I've learned to hold them lightly, partly due to my Centering Prayer practice, and partly because I have been wrong so many times. So often, out of empathy for my suffering friends, of whichever ethnicity, religion or ideology, I embraced their narrative without question; invariably, it turned out to be just one side of the story. Was it wrong? Not really, but it so happens that any narrative, on whichever side of a conflict, is never the full story, therefore never fully true. As Aeschylus wrote *"The first casualty of war is truth"*.

Another unintended result is that when we uncritically embrace a particular narrative, in any war, we also adopt its embedded hate and dehumanization of the other side. There doesn't seem to be room for loving one without hating the other. And it is something that I still fall into, especially if I indulge in too much news watching. Even my Centering Prayer practice suffers from it, as the images of war, whether true or carefully manipulated, keep playing in my mind. No matter how long I sit in silence and try to let them go, they keep returning. Hence, I have learned to limit my news intake, but for someone who loves history as much as I do, it's hard to desist from seeing it happen now.

I know I am not alone in this, that even many mystics and contemplatives of the past did not always remain grounded at their Center. For all the beautiful things that they wrote about the inner path, some did not do as well with their outer one; they endorsed crusades, the inquisition and the warring factions of their day. I have even seen modern contemplatives falling for it, and none of us are so "centered" as to be above it. This is why I appreciate so much that 9th point of the Contemplative Outreach guidelines, which says:

"To remain accessible to everyone, Contemplative Outreach does not endorse particular causes or take part in public controversies, whether religious, political, or social."

For me, this is not just a precautionary measure aimed at ensuring the smooth running of our fellowship and avoiding situations like the one in my language class. For me, this is much deeper, and expresses the very heart of the contemplative path. You see, *"particular causes and public controversies, whether religious, political, or social"* are always characterized by the dualistic conflict of opposite views, and you cannot really be at your center while dividing reality that way. Neither can we be at peace with others while holding to the judgments that form at the outer edges, where our attention can only see fragments of reality. Only from a place of undivided "attention", as Simone Weil would call it, can we truly honor our common humanity and see Christ in all, no matter who they are or what they believe. As the Persian poet Rumi wrote,

*"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
There is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
The world is too full to talk about."*

That is the *field* we meet in when we practice Centering Prayer. It is a place beyond the flow of thoughts and ideas about social, religious or political right and wrong. *That grass* is Eden, the place before dividing the world into good and evil, the place of origin and light, that in our judgment is but darkness and a cloud of unknowing. To quote Simone Weil again, *"God can only be present to us under the form of absence"*, presence in the absence of our judgment, of our dividing the world into a multiplicity, *too full to talk about*.

So, there is a *field* of oneness, a rock beneath the shifting sands of ideas and opinions, a spaceless center that holds it all. There, at that junction of humanity and divinity, is a hidden treasure and a pearl of great price, hidden yet present to all. Those who find it can say with Paul, *"it is no longer I who live, but Christ"*, and rejoice with Thomas Keating for having found their Truer Self. So, may we continue to surrender our small, judgmental and fragmented selves, that we may meet at our True Center, and from there go forth to be peacemakers. ☸

*"Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God."*



Contemplative Outreach celebrates its 40th birthday!

WENDY MAREE
PRETORIA, SOUTH AFRICA

‘**W**hen Thomas Keating and his brother monks began to introduce Centering Prayer at those pioneering retreats at St Joseph’s Abbey ... a new generation of Christian seekers took eagerly to the waters of Centering prayer, [and] their deep immersion experience of contemplation began to stir a greatly renewed interest in both Bible study and participation in Christian community.’ (Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer, and Inner Awakening*). With no idea that their wish would eventually result in an international organization, Fathers Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and Basil Pennington embarked on an experiment. Today their experiment is called Contemplative Outreach.

In 2024, we are celebrating Contemplative Outreach’s 40th birthday. Throughout Scripture the number 40 is significant. It signifies new life, new growth, transformation, a change from one great task to another great task. It signifies the ending of one way as we know it and the beginning of another experience. It also symbolises a period of testing, trial, and great triumph. It is connected to the fulfilment of God’s promises. We are familiar with the many stories in the Bible that speak of the number 40: Noah and the ark, where God flooded the earth for 40 days, wiping out everything and then starting a new season with humankind; the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years, after being delivered from their old life of slavery and before being led to a new life in the Promised Land; Moses spending

time with God up the mountain for 40 days, learning first-hand about God’s presence and coming down with the Ten Commandments and the blueprint for the Tabernacle, both giving clear instructions on how to live according to God’s will; Jesus fasting in the wilderness for 40 days, overcoming Satan and then beginning his ministry. These few examples clearly show the spiritual significance of the number 40. Over the last 20 years in our contemplative group, we have honoured these significant biblical numbers such as 40 and 50. When someone turned 40, we had a special birthday celebration where each one took turns to speak a blessing into and over the person. When someone turned 50, which is the year of Jubilee, we made them a special blessing book to celebrate these grace-filled way-markers in their lives.

As we celebrate Contemplative Outreach’s remarkable milestone, we stand with one foot in the past, looking back with deep gratitude for all the Holy Spirit has done in and through Contemplative Outreach, its leaders and volunteers, and its developing communities. Our Christian contemplative heritage is being resurrected and restored. But we also stand with one foot in the land of anticipation and expectation for the ‘next great task’ the Holy Spirit wants to accomplish through us all. Just like Esther, we have arrived at this point in world history ‘for a time such as this’. Father Thomas and others brought us thus far, but now the leadership of the Holy Spirit implanted in each of us will lead us into the Promised

Land of contemplative living, a land of transforming union with our God. When the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they ate from a harvest they never planted, until they could sow crops to eat. We have eaten from and been sustained from the rich heritage left to us by those who determinedly and faithfully sought union with God. As we go ahead into the next 40 years, we too need to sow seeds for a next generation of seekers to harvest, and so on and so on. The fruits and gifts of the Spirit in each generation will continue the work.

The Israelites’ journey was marked with discontent, complaining, and moaning, which kept them blind to God in their midst and God’s awesome provision. Maybe what we need at this time in Contemplative Outreach’s journey is a spirit of ‘holy discontent’. By this I mean an ever-increasing desire for more of God’s self: for more knowing of God, greater loving of God and deeper surrender to God. We need the longing to keep sharing this long-hidden treasure with more and more people. We ourselves need to go deeper into the contemplative life. Is it not amazing that all of our Contemplative Life Programme praxis is done over 40 days? Is this maybe the time for each of us to immerse ourselves more fully into these praxes? Let us take the time in this 40th year to bless God for this gift of contemplation, for the history of this organisation, and ask God to lead us forward in such a way as to honour and bless God, imparting new life and healing into the world and leaving a treasure store for the next generation to discover. ☸



Let Today

Let today be today
not tomorrow
or
the weekend
with its vagabond promises of something more
or last week
when you did something you couldn't undo
and wished it was already this week
because by now
you would have forgotten
or
forgiven.

Let today be itself;
there is warm soup and a crisp apple and
the leaves' first flare of gold.

Be still
let it come to you
as an embrace
merciful and plentiful
enough
to carry you
until tomorrow.

JODY REIS JOHNSON
MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA, USA



A New World Emerges

TIA NORMAN
HOUSTON, TEXAS, USA

A broken relationship, broken heart, and vocational crisis led me to Centering Prayer. I was nearly eight months pregnant when I learned of my partner's infidelity. This news, coupled with an already persistent yearning to discover a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life, felt like the catalyst for impending collapse. The month I was to bring new life into the world was the month my world began falling apart.

The relationship ended, my newborn eventually became a toddler, and the frustration around discovering what I was here to do intensified with each trip into downtown Houston for my 9-to-5.

On my way home from work one evening, out of pure desperation, I pulled off the road and into a parking lot. I placed both hands on the steering wheel; my head soon followed before the words, "I can't do this anymore, help me," found their way out of my mouth with the hope that God was listening. It is difficult to describe what happened next. Somewhere within that prayer for help there was a gentle communication back to me encouraging me to read the Bible. It wasn't audible, more like a feeling. It didn't make much sense in the broader scope of my life at that time either, especially because much of my upbringing did not consist of any type of churchgoing or organized religion. I trusted both the confusion and the direction and for one year I tucked my toddler in each night, sat by her bedside and as she drifted off, I read the Bible passage by passage until there were no passages left. Certain lines spoke louder to me than others, much of it I didn't understand. My life had drastically changed. I was left with a deep curiosity to know what was going on within the context of each biblical story. Why were these 66 books the ones that came to be known as the Bible?

Knowing what I know now about the contemplative journey I can recognize how I was unknowingly engaging in a daily practice of Lectio Divina through these nightly readings. Yes, a relationship had fallen apart but a new one was developing; one that would lead me into the depths of the stillness, silence, and solitude of Centering Prayer. A full year with all of those words on those pages coupled with my curiosity and eventually I found myself on a retreat in the Hill Country of Texas.

The retreat opened with a welcome and an overview of how we would spend the extended weekend together. Just before we were about to adjourn for the first evening a tall, slender gentleman with white hair was introduced. He approached the microphone slowly. He stood there, silent, and in that silence, I noticed how noisy things were within me. My mind was racing, my thoughts were loud and they began to intensify as he stood there not saying a word in front of the technology designed to carry his voice to our ears. When he did speak I listened with a certain attentiveness. His presence, his cadence, and his continued comfort with silence despite being in front of a group ready to hear him speak drew me in. He extended a general invitation to the intimate crowd to join him for a “sit” the following morning. I decided at that moment that I would accept his invitation. That “sit” served as my first official introduction to Centering Prayer back in 2015. Yes, my world had fallen apart but a new one was emerging.

When I returned home I did my best to weave periods of Centering Prayer into my daily routine. I found early morning attempts only gave way to my exhaustion and I often drifted back to sleep. Evenings were not ideal as my toddler was now a very active 4-year-old. My practice ultimately took root within the vestibule of my Nissan Altima on my lunch breaks from doing work I no longer felt was mine to do.

Thankfully what was growing within me was not limited to the confines of my vehicle. The community I had landed in as I was searching for a place where I could ask questions about matters of life, spirit and the commingling of the two played witness to my curiosity and I was invited to start a Centering Prayer group which I was happy and excited to begin. The practice expanded from my car to one of the free rooms offered within the public library. Three attendees may have been the attendance record during that time which was a blessing considering I had no idea what I was doing.

My experience of the contemplative journey and Centering Prayer, based on my current capacity to understand both, has been one of both undoing and weaving together. As I reflect on many other moments of my life there are times when the thread seems more prominent than others.

I had no way of knowing that the Centering Prayer group I was invited to begin would serve as the incubator for a deeper sense of how I could let go of what I was doing to earn a living and engage in work that made me feel alive. I had no way of knowing how that Centering Prayer group would serve as a pivotal part of my formation and an entryway into serving as pastor of Awakenings, Inc., the very community that had been so welcoming of me during a time when I felt excruciatingly lost.

I had no way of knowing as I sat by my daughter's bedside all those years ago feeling so alone that the gift of Centering Prayer and a more comprehensive understanding of the contemplative journey would serve as a way that I could be present to the collective disparities that have been magnified on a macro level since March of 2020, giving me the ability to recognize and share how the contemplative mind can also serve as the creative mind that liberates and unifies so much of what is separating and dividing the world today.

My days look much different now than they did all those years ago and my expectancy has shifted. I lean heavily toward the knowing that the minutes I spend in Centering Prayer each day deeply impact all the other minutes within a 24-hour window. As a minority, a parent and a pastor I find myself in a constant place of mystery, frustration, curiosity and imaginative opportunity. I'm determined to illuminate ways the contemplative mind and heart can serve as a disruption to the injustices we are witnessing and experiencing today on a collective level as part of the expectation I carry for a more compassionate and just world available to us all in this moment.

The contemplative creative mind has helped me with divisions and disparities by creating a path of connection. In gaining a glimpse into the ways I have lived divided within myself I also come to recognize how we live divided among each other. In recognizing my own tendency to over identify with the false self I recognize the illusions influencing organizations, communities, politics and the world at large. In recognizing the influence of those illusions I discover I can ground myself in a freedom that is beyond circumstances and conditions. In grounding myself in a freedom beyond circumstance and conditions I discover the creative power we have in giving birth to a new world. ☸

Snowmass

CELIA MCBRIDE
PORT HOPE, ONTARIO, CANADA

My first introduction to Thomas Keating was during an 8-day silent retreat at a retreat centre in the UK where I was discerning whether to become a nun. We were shown a series of videos called *The Spiritual Journey* and what a dynamic teacher! His sense of humour, his intellect and his great love of God's mystery and compassion made me an instant fan.

During this retreat, one thing led to another and a newfound friend asked me to go with her on a 10-day silent retreat to St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado the following year. I was excited by the idea.

My admiration for "Thomas" (as I later learned he was called by all who loved him) inspired me to write him a letter, asking about his definition of God as "Is-ness" and letting him know I'd been offered a chance to go to Snowmass. To my great delight, he wrote me back, suggesting that the opportunity to go on the retreat "might be an invitation from God." He encouraged me to "listen and pray over it" and offered to talk more with me in person should I decide to come to the monastery.

As it turned out, religious life was not my calling. Winter turned to spring and my friend from the retreat sent an email to say she was not well enough to travel to Snowmass after all.

"Would you like to take my spot on the retreat?" she wrote. "It would be my gift."

I wrote to Thomas again, and again he wrote back, this time offering a definite invitation for us to meet. "I'm not always strong enough for visits," he wrote, "but right now I'm okay."

When June 2016 arrived, I flew to Aspen and when we arrived on the monastery grounds, I marvelled at the retreat center, all glass and stone, flying up to formidable cathedral ceilings cross-hatched with arching wooden beams. The furniture in my room was simple and spare but the high ceilings, kitchenette and modern bathroom made it all feel very luxurious. I took out my journal and wrote:

A privilege. Lord, you gave me a life of privilege. It does not belong to me, I embrace it.

About halfway through the retreat, it was time for me to meet with Thomas. I'd written him a note when I'd first arrived and he'd sent a reply with the time of our visit.

"Thomas hasn't been feeling well lately," Jeff, one of the retreat facilitators said on the drive down to the monastery, "but he loves having visitors so he must be feeling better. He's 93 now."

"I feel so honoured," I told him.

"We all do," he said. Jeff drove the van around to the back of the monastery and we got out.

"This is a long-term care wing where the older monks are housed and visitors are given permission to enter," Jeff said, leading me through the doors and pointing to a library at the end of the hall. "He's right down there."

Thomas was sitting in a chair, looking older than he did in the *Spiritual Journey* videos. He was wearing a wool hat on his bald head and a bulky fleece sweater over his monk's habit. He stood up to greet me and took my hand in his own huge hands, smiling and looking into my eyes. Even though his height had been much reduced by age, he was still very tall.

We sat across from each other in comfortable chairs. I knew he had many admirers so I reminded him of our correspondence. He began to ask me questions about myself and I told him a little bit about my career as a theatre artist and filmmaker and my current work as a spiritual director.

"I've been given so many gifts," I said. "It makes it challenging sometimes to decide what to do with my life."

"You can pick one," he said. "Do you have a family?"

"I'm a family of one. I've been staying in my parents' home while they're away."

"But you must have an income, dear heart." I smiled and tried to alleviate his concern. Then I shared a little bit about my calling to become a monk and my time spent living with the Sisters of Contemplation.

"Did you go through the novitiate?" he asked.

"Well, I had to first discern whether to become a Catholic."

"And did you?"

"No. It was kind of an agonizing process but I realized that no single tradition really fits me and I just couldn't submit. I love Jesus but I'm also a yogi. I felt called to become a Swami but that didn't fit either."

He responded openly, speaking about Hindu Christians and new monasticism. Then he used a word I wasn't familiar with but liked the sound of right away: interspirituality.

"Perhaps that's your journey," he said, with true tenderness, "to be a part of this great interspiritual movement that is growing. Did you know we've been hosting an Interspiritual Conference here at Snowmass for over two decades? Interspirituality is integral to the evolution of our human consciousness."

I nodded, wanting so much to have this conversation with him, but finding words proved difficult in his powerful presence. He, too, seemed a little nervous, picking at his nails and fidgeting. He was human after all.

"Have you heard of holons?" he asked. I hadn't. He began to describe



PHOTO COURTESY OF RON BARNETT

a holon as something that was made up of parts but was also entirely whole in itself.

"A particle splits or grows and changes without ever losing its original energy. Its original structure remains." He became more and more animated as he expounded on holons, seeing them as a way for us to perceive and experience the human/spiritual journey. "No matter how we change or grow or split or multiply, we always and forever contain The Whole."

"I love astrophysics and quantum theory," I said.

"Yes?" He smiled, excitedly.

"I especially loved hearing you say in one of your videos that 'Religion has to listen to science because science is giving us up-to-date information about who and what God is.'"

"Well, it is," he said.

Like Mary of Bethany, who sat at Jesus' feet and listened to him for hours, I could have sat with Thomas forever, but I knew he was getting

tired. We stood, and he embraced me again, thanking me for coming.

"Thank you for inspiring me and so many others," I said.

On fire with happiness, I hiked up past the retreat centre to the top of the green hills, where a series of rock formations formed a high cliff. I sidled along the edge to explore a cave-like crevice where birds nested, cracks exhaled cold air and faces appeared in ghostly patterns. Fatigue started to set in and I took a break to sit down and look out. At my feet was a rock about the size of an oyster with patterns that made it look like an eye. When I picked it up, it split in two. When I put it together, the "eye" became whole again.

Holons. ☸

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Wisdom from Inside the Walls

ED METZLER

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In November 2022, the Contemplative Outreach Prison Outreach Service Team (COPOST) sent a survey to those experiencing incarceration who had written to COPOST, seeking their wisdom regarding what people inside and those transitioning to outside most need.

In January, the Team partnered with another nonprofit, Praestolari, Inc., to hold a five-day silent retreat followed by a day of discussion in Snowmass, Colorado. While participants agreed that the retreat time was key, the discussions were also important – a rare opportunity for team members to huddle with four members of the Outside the Wall (OTW) group who had previously experienced incarceration and go over the 26 responses received from those still inside the walls. That survey and discussion highlighted the work that still needs to be done. And what's needed boils down to one word: Connection.

As one person who responded to the survey wrote: "It would be awesome to be connected [this way] to a Centering Prayer group on the outside. If a group in Bismark, North Dakota, USA, for example, joins together at 9 p.m. Eastern time to do Centering Prayer, say on a Thursday, I would love to 'join' them

even though it's here alone in my cell. Just being a prayer partner with people in the free world where I can join with them would be great."

Phil Darghty (aka "Frenchy") is an OTW member who recently joined the COPOST team. In his 32 years in the California prison system, that connection came through the mail. He said one of the most important things COPOST does is answer letters from those inside the walls.

"It's the most important thing, to me. (Getting mail) is what sustained me. It's a lifeline from the outside world. It allowed me the possibility of starting over when I got out. You have no idea. Every day that I got a letter it was contact with the real world."

But, of course, it isn't just the mail that provides that connection.

"Centering Prayer groups inside prisons are a powerful thing," Phil said. "Because you're not doing it on your own. People aren't looking at you like, 'Oh! Look at that crazy guy over there (meditating).' And you don't have to be in a group, you just have to know about the group. They know Frenchy is involved with a meditation group and they know it's real. They know I'm taking time out of my day to attend the meetings. If they know about the Centering Prayer group and know that I'm a part of it, then it's cool, 'He's just doing his meditation.' Appearances are everything in prison."

Frank Baker, another OTW member, said one of the problems with the contemplative lifestyle that hinders the possibilities of more connection is that it tends to be restrained. Practitioners tend to hope it will attract others. He said it needs to be promoted more.

"The contemplative practice is not simply sitting on the cushion two or three times a day. It involves active life, life not on the cushion. We can't just say, 'We're going to live our contemplative lifestyle and do what we do and hopefully others who aren't engaged right now will be attracted to us.'"

Frank would like to see Contemplative Outreach and COPOST reach out to those inside the walls with the technology that is available inside prisons today. For instance, he said, in Florida, residents have access

to very basic tablets, which allow them to view and listen to podcasts. That, he said, is an opportunity that if we don't take advantage of it, the movement could die.

Another OTW member, Tim Clements, would like to see more mentorship, people helping those who are transitioning back to life on the outside.

"This is where I feel the church has abandoned its mission. It has a problem stepping up to its responsibilities, and has abdicated them to governments, who are just hopeless bureaucracies. People who are released need people who are living in the real world to simply answer their questions. Even if they don't know the answers, they know how to find the answers easily."

Lawrence Hamilton, a member of OTW and until recently a COPOST team member, agrees.

"There are so many things you need when you first get out. You need your birth certificate, you need a Social Security card, you need your bank account. You need all these things set up and if you were trying to do that on your own it could take a year or more. But for people on the outside who know how to do that, it might only take them a month. Plus, they can support you with help, transportation, and other kinds of support. Staying encouraged."


Rita Weick, COPOST co-leader said she understands that need.

"What came to the fore at the retreat was how difficult it is to make the transition from inside to outside and to maintain a practice when faced with the tremendous and stressful adjustment to the outside," Rita said. "What it emphasized for me was that whatever we decide to focus on as COPOST that we do our best to teach and support the prayer inside and outside and not to burn ourselves out by overextending. It's been a humbling experience to learn firsthand from former inmates the extent of need inside and outside the walls and to see in comparison what little it seems we have to offer. However, this realization has made it that much more clear that we can partner with other groups who are addressing what we are not and together we have a LOT to offer."

"Counterintuitively, all of the input has helped me to deeply appreciate what we HAVE in place: Zoom meetings for prospective volunteers and active volunteers, the webpage with the Resources link, the prisoner correspondence and Theophilus letters, and the weekly OTW meetings — all in support of our basic mission of teaching and supporting this transformative practice."

And transformation, said Lawrence, is the key.

"On the other side of transformation is so much more positivity and beneficial things that can come in your life," he said. "Tune into who you really are on the inside, then you can start making choices. For me it's just that tuning in. 'Wow! So this is who I really am. I'm not this criminal — I'm a child of God! And God really loves me, and God doesn't hold anything against me. God just wants me to grow and thrive and just wants the best for me.'" ☸



United in Prayer Day: March 8-9, 2024



On the Saturday closest to Fr. Keating's birthday (March 7), Contemplative Outreach celebrates United in Prayer Day, a 23-hour prayer vigil globally hosted via Zoom. It begins at 9pm Eastern on Friday, March 8 and continues until 8pm Eastern on Saturday, March 9. 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. Those who so choose may join the hour hosted by the Outside the Walls group from 11 AM to noon Eastern on Saturday March 9. To anyone without access to Zoom: 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.

Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.
Prison Outreach Service Team
1560 Union Valley Rd #909
West Milford, NJ 07480

Silent Worship – A Psalm

*Be silent in the presence of the Lord
Worship from your hearts
You peoples of the earth.*

*Shush yourselves plants and trees,
Let not the wind make a sound through you.*

*Be still oceans; caution your waves to hush;
Sink into your quiet depths creatures of the sea.*

*Bow before the Lord all land creatures
Fall prostrate you who fly through the air.*

*Moon, sun, stars, planets and all galaxies
Let the rhythm of your soundlessness prevail*

*And join in the heavenly chorus of the Great Silence
In the presence of the Holy One.*

*Be silent in the presence of the Lord
Worship from your hearts
All you peoples of the earth.*

Jacqui-Theresa Leiba
Port of Spain, Trinidad



Changed My Life and Changed My Eternity

JIM BELCHER
WILMORE, KENTUCKY, USA

My name is Jim Belcher. I'm a retired United Methodist pastor, age 73, living in Wilmore, Kentucky, where I attended seminary long ago. I discovered Centering Prayer in 1987 and have been practicing it for 36 years. My contribution is a testimonial to the practice of Centering Prayer.

In April 2023, I woke up in the wee hours of the morning with crushing chest pain. The initial EKG indicated a heart attack. Subsequent tests revealed calcification at the root of the aortic valve. The cardiologist will monitor the calcification to determine if surgery is necessary. I have mild angina on a daily basis (and am having it now as I write).

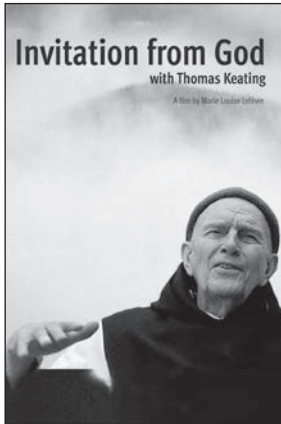
For the first time I face the possible end of my life, along with the decision to have surgery or forego surgery and enjoy the time I have left. As a pastor I saw many people face the end of life; more often than not it was a time of high anxiety and fear, even terror, for them.

Words fail here so please bear with me. For me, facing the end of life is not stressful or frightening; I don't feel anxious at the prospect of "facing the unknown" because, thanks to Centering Prayer, there is no unknown, just another step closer to the God in whose presence I've sought to sit for the last 37 years (half of my life). I am calm and at peace, even a bit excited at this next step in the spiritual journey.

So tomorrow morning, as I have done for almost four decades, I will rise in the predawn darkness, sit on my cushion, repeat my sacred word, and offer myself to the God who I hope (but don't presume) meets me in the silence. Centering Prayer changed my life; and, I trust, changed my eternity too.

Thank you and the Contemplative Outreach family the world over. A special thanks to CO Birmingham, whose retreats I've attended over the years. And to the Centering Prayer group I sat with weekly at St. Martha's Church in Lexington, Kentucky. ☸

Invitation from God film and booklet by Thomas Keating



A wonderful introduction to the subject of contemplation and the spiritual journey and its implications for personal and global freedom. It could also serve as enrichment in a retreat or prayer groups. Danish film director, Marie Louise Lefevre interviewed Fr. Thomas Keating in 2006 and what resulted was a spiritually enriching and stunningly beautiful film. The conversation between the director and Fr. Thomas and the beauty of the film's images serve to express what the contemplative life is about. With 19-page booklet.

The film includes a main segment (*Invitation from God*) and eight more selected conversations which total 90 min:

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

Hardcopy DVD and booklet: \$30 USD, Online video and PDF booklet: \$15 USD, Mp3 audio and PDF booklet: \$8 USD

OTHER RESOURCES



The podcast series, *Opening Minds, Opening Hearts*, has two full seasons of episodes available on all 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>

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



Contemplative Outreach



- ▶ ***The Book of Nature: Reflecting the Radiance of Creation and God***, Abbot Joseph Boyle, 2010 (59 min)
- ▶ ***The Kiss of God: A Dialogue of Devoutness between Fr. Thomas Keating and Reb. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi***, 2006 (about 43 min)
- ▶ Search under [the Playlists tab](#) for more video series

Utmost Charity: A Call to Deeper Love Self-guided e-course



PHOTO COURTESY OF ELPOPOPHOTO

This practice-based e-course explores how we live out the movement of the Indwelling Spirit in everyday life, living an inside-out life rooted and grounded in Love and for Love. Drawing heavily on the teachings of Thomas Keating, it includes contemplative wisdom from Bernadette Roberts, David Hawkins, Howard Thurman, and others, weaving together themes that explore:

- Utmost charity as the fruit and gift of the Spirit;
- Utmost charity flowing from the state of transforming union as selfless service;
- The practice of utmost charity;
- Utmost charity as a way of being

Read more on the website at [Program>Online Courses](#).

Or, you may choose from a variety of options including e-courses to learn practices such as Centering Prayer, Lectio Divina, Welcoming Prayer, The Prayer of Forgiveness and the Process of Discernment. Or choose e-courses for spiritual enrichment and practice support including *Practicing the Presence of God*, *The Transformation of Suffering*, *Wisdom for Living: The Parables of Jesus* and more. Read more on the website at [Program>Online Courses](#). Scholarships are available.

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

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United in Prayer Day

March 8-9, 2024

23-hours of continuous prayer hosted
by individuals and groups
all over the world via Zoom
Details available on the website
and in the monthly e-bulletin



Contemplative
Outreach

Join us to celebrate the inspiring legacy of Thomas Keating
and 40 years of our evolving community as we gather for the
Contemplative Outreach conference in Atlanta, Georgia, USA
on September 26-29. Attend the whole conference or a one-day
event on the Emory University campus on September 28.

This will feature the Thomas Keating archives
and various speakers.

Much of the conference will be live-streamed or available
for viewing shortly after the event. More information and
registration details will be forthcoming.



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CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE #14