

CENTERING PRAYER

A Contemplative Path to Virtuous Living

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INTRODUCTION

Going for a walk is a highlight of my day. I am particularly fond of a path near my house that winds through the forest up to the Blue Ridge Parkway. I have a variety of reasons for going on a daily walk, but my main motive is simply to feel more alive.

Perhaps, you are opening up this book because you also want to feel more alive—that is, more spiritually alive. My goal is to support you in this endeavor by setting you on the path of Centering Prayer.

Centering Prayer

I started my practice of Centering Prayer more than ten years ago, and some of my early expectations have been confirmed. For example, I imagined that it would impact my relationship with God, and it has. I correctly assumed that Centering Prayer would include practices such as opening to God, giving my attention to God, waiting on God, listening to God, and receiving God. At that time, these disciplines fit within my understanding of the term *spiritual*.

I discovered many pleasant surprises within my practice of Centering Prayer. I was amazed to find the power of choice, the option of a new identity, and the possibility of healing. I

was unprepared to find Centering Prayer to be a place where I would find greater self-knowledge, fuller self-acceptance, and a deeper sense that I was loved by God.

Over time, I encountered other unexpected elements of Centering Prayer. I was surprised to confront personal struggles, unique vulnerabilities, unhappiness, and my own obstacles to closeness with God. In silence, I discovered my tendencies to react by hiding and by getting angry. I did not foresee that Centering Prayer would unearth unwanted thoughts and painful feelings, as well as a host of unrealistic expectations.

Eventually, I revised my concept of both Centering Prayer and the term “spiritual.” I have come to understand that every experience of Centering Prayer—wanted or unwanted, good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant—is used by God for our transformation. All of our encounters of slipping in and out of silence, of sensing God’s presence and absence, of feeling at rest and in turmoil, are part of God’s movement in our lives. Being *spiritual* means being open and receptive to them all.¹

Thomas Merton tells us, “Contemplation is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life.”² Contemplative prayer offers us the opportunity to be fully alive. However, the problem is that we have misconceptions about contemplative prayer. In response to this difficulty, Thomas Keating and his associates developed Centering Prayer as a method for clarifying and simplifying the practice of contemplative prayer.

What are the origins of Centering Prayer? Centering Prayer was developed in the 1970s by three men: Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and Basil Pennington. It is important to note that it was a decade during which spiritual teachers of major Eastern religions were coming to the United States and presenting their unique methods of meditation. Many young people, learning about these other traditions, came to

St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, where Keating was abbot, asking for a Christian method of contemplation. Since such an approach was not available, Keating tasked his monks with creating one. The result was Centering Prayer.³

From humble beginnings, Centering Prayer has spread to a network of supporters around the world. Centering Prayer was first offered to retreatants at St. Joseph's Abbey, where Keating clarified his method of Centering Prayer. Through his retreats, writings, and leadership, Keating focused on refining the essentials of the method. Today, the organization that Keating founded to disseminate this practice—that is, Contemplative Outreach—has over 160 chapters in the United States and twenty other countries. Fifty years after the advent of Centering Prayer, with the support and resources of Contemplative Outreach, Centering Prayer groups are active around the world.⁴

Centering Prayer is not something new. Rather, Keating was careful to draw upon a long tradition of Christian contemplative prayer. The roots of Centering Prayer can be traced back to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the fourth and fifth centuries. For example, Keating, quoting Evagrius Ponticus, observes that prayer is the “laying aside of thoughts.”⁵

A sampling of three other important contemplative thinkers indicates Keating's connection to the Christian contemplative tradition. For example, Keating's emphasis on the power of intention reflects the influence of the anonymous author of the fourteenth-century spiritual classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, who described prayer as a “naked intent toward God, the desire for him alone,” as “enough.”⁶ Furthermore, Keating's teachings on the effortless nature of Centering Prayer can be traced back to the sixteenth-century saint Teresa of Avila, who compared the ease of contemplative prayer to the

simplicity of watering a garden by letting rain fall on it.⁷ Finally, Keating adopted the term “centering” from Thomas Merton who wrote, “At the center of our being . . . is a point or spark with the invisible light of heaven.”⁸

Even though Keating links Centering Prayer to the historic tradition of Christian contemplative prayer, he also promotes it as a new and distinct method. Keating writes:

Centering prayer is an effort to renew the teachings of the Christian tradition of contemplative prayer. It is an attempt to present that tradition in an up-to-date form and to put a certain order and method to it.⁹

To advance this goal, Keating sets forth four simple guidelines for Centering Prayer:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.
2. Sit comfortably and with your eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.
3. When you become aware of your thoughts (Contemplative Outreach has modified this language to read, “When engaged with your thoughts . . .”), return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

In this book, we will explore the notion of contemplative prayer by focusing on fifteen of the key practices and princi-

ples of Centering Prayer. However, the only way to truly comprehend Centering Prayer is to experience it. A person can learn about contemplative prayer, and a teacher can only point you in the right direction. However, it is up to you to walk and experience the contemplative path.

Centering Prayer and Character

Thomas Keating clearly identifies the purpose of Centering Prayer. He writes, “The only way to judge this prayer is by its long-range fruits: whether in daily life you enjoy great peace, humility, and charity.”¹⁰ Here, in his use of the term “fruits,” Keating is employing a metaphor used in the New Testament by Paul: “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22–23).

”You may be wondering, “What does character (or do virtues) have to do with Centering Prayer?” This may be the first time that you have explored a connection between the two subjects and considered Centering Prayer as a path to character.

Why have I invited you to travel on this path? I first got the idea from a quote by William James, the father of modern psychology. He asserts: “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of . . . character.”¹¹ In this line, James spells out the path to character—that is, voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again.

That is exactly what we do in Centering Prayer. In contemplative prayer, we discover that learning to detach from everyday thoughts takes us to a more profound dimension of reality.

And, at this deeper level, our character begins to grow as we adopt the virtues of Jesus. What an amazing realization—that is, that something as ordinary as how we handle our thoughts can take us on a journey toward character.

Centering Prayer and Centered Living

Centering Prayer can move us toward a life of character and virtues, but it is about more. Because I have a counseling practice in which I work with individuals, couples, and families, I am naturally concerned with applying the principles and exercises of Centering Prayer on a very practical level.

I refer to the practical applications of Centering Prayer to daily living as “Centered Living.” Consequently, in each chapter, under the heading of Centered Living, we examine relationship skills designed to help you become more loving toward others and toward yourself. For example, in part one, we will investigate what it means to face our fears, manage our emotions, hold onto hope, and express gratitude within the context of relationships. Trustworthiness, being present, letting go of control, and making good choices that benefit others are some of the relationship skills that we will probe in part two. Finally, in part three, we will spell out practical skills such as being responsible, finishing what we start, listening, forgiveness, kindness, and empathy.

We are setting out on a spiritual path of contemplative prayer. One of my goals is to assist you in growing closer to God. However, there is so much more. I hope that you will become more alive in every area of your life—that is, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and socially. My hope is that you will not only grow in your ability to receive and respond to

God's love but that you will learn to get along better with others. I also pray that you will flourish in your love and acceptance of yourself.

In this book, I am inviting you to set out on a contemplative path. The end point is "to facilitate the process of inner transformation."¹² As a result, I pray that you will become a person of good character, a person better equipped to love God, others, and self.

Chapter Organization

Each chapter is organized into three sections. The first part of the chapter will explore one particular principle or exercise of Centering Prayer. For example, in the first chapter, we will examine the importance of being vulnerable when we pray. (Since there are fifteen chapters, we will review fifteen practices.) In the second section of the chapter, we explore how a particular activity of Centering Prayer is linked to one particular character trait or virtue; in chapter 1, we consider the virtue of compassion. (By the end of the book, you will have examined fifteen virtues.) The third section of the chapter is devoted to the practical applications of what we have considered earlier in the chapter. This is called "Centered Living." In chapter 1, for example, we review relationship skills, such as being responsive and developing accurate views of others.

Now let us begin our journey and by looking at an essential principle of Centering Prayer—vulnerability.