Centering Prayer and Christian Life

by Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault

This article has been excerpted and reformatted (at the author’s suggestion, with the publisher’s permission) from:
Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening
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I have spoken so far of Centering Prayer as being rooted and grounded in *kenosis*, the self-emptying love of Christ understood as the core gesture of his life and the source of his sacramental power. But in Christian mystical theology, the word *kenosis* is used in another context as well: to describe the internal life of the Trinity. It speaks of the self-emptying love with which the Father spills into (or gives himself fully into) the Son, the Son into the Spirit, the Spirit into the Father. This complete intercirculation in love is called *perichoresis*. It’s sort of like the buckets on a watermill; as they empty one into the other, the mill turns and the energy of love becomes manifest and accessible. The same analogy I believe holds true for our life in God. What we experience in Centering Prayer as *kenosis*, or personal self-emptying, is always part and parcel of a greater *perichoresis*, one self-emptying spilling into another in the great watermill of love, through which God shows us his innermost nature and bestows this vital energy upon the world in a cascade of divine creativity:

“I am the vine; you are the branches; abide in me as I in you” *(John 15: 3–4)*.

The most profoundly beautiful imagery in the New Testament is communal; it speaks of this great *INTERCIRCULATION* of love.

So often we think of Centering Prayer—or any form of meditation—as alone, withdrawn, or focused on one’s own personal development or special relationship with God, not shared with others (because we’re under the impression that the only way to share with others is to talk). But in point of fact, whenever we participate in that act of *kenosis*, it is always as part and parcel of *perichoresis*. That is the essential Mystery, the beauty that Jesus lived and died and through which he rose again. There is no gesture more ultimately communal than *kenosis*, for it is the ultimate act of self-transcendence. As we participate in this gesture, no matter how isolated it first may feel, how divided and cut off from others, the deep truth we will eventually come to know is that any act of *kenosis* reconnects us, inevitably and instantly, to that great vine of love.

Thomas Merton learned this lesson through a long and difficult journey, perhaps the only way that this lesson is ever fully learned. When he entered the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemane in December 1941, the one thing he knew for certain was that he wanted out of “the world” and straight into God. As he took one last backward look before the monastery gate clanked shut behind him (*he hoped forever*), all he could see was a hopeless wasteland of sin, hypocrisy, noise, and illusion. Ahead lay a vast Himalayan silence and holiness. Or so he thought.
But the contemplative life is full of its own surprising plot twists. Once you give yourself fully to it, once you sign on the dotted line of kenosis, perichoresis is what you’ll eventually get. Seventeen years later, that inexorable inner blueprint bore fruit in him in a completely unexpected way, when, on a routine shopping trip into town he was suddenly engulfed in a blinding epiphany of love. He describes the experience in an essay movingly titled “A Member of the Human Race:"

In Louisville, at the Corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and that I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of a pure self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.

Nor was this a fluke “mystical experience.” What Merton saw in that moment stayed with him till the end of his life; it was a permanent transformation of his consciousness.

This is the unitive seeing we are all called to: the secret of Jesus’ great commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Not as much as yourself, as egoic consciousness always interprets, but as yourself: interchangeably One in that great vine of love which is the mystical body of Christ. If you embrace a path that begins in kenosis, you will wind up in perichoresis; that’s the wager. That’s also the Church—its vision and its path in a nutshell.

In October 2003 Thomas Keating convened a council of contemplative “elders” at St. Benedict’s Monastery in Snowmass. The purpose of the meeting was to ponder ways to encourage a more thorough contemplative formation within the curriculum of seminaries, or in other words, in the training of future church leaders. Those invited to the meeting represented the three major “schools” of Christian meditation practice (Centering Prayer, Christian Zen, Christian Meditation) and virtually the entire spectrum of Christian denominational affiliations, from Roman Catholic to Baptist. What this diverse group of meditators had in common was years and years of experience in their respective practices.
As they sat down to the task, the group decided that it needed to begin by putting together a working definition of contemplative prayer and practice. By a process of group sharing and consensus, the twelve participants pooled their collective experience and came up with the following statement:

The Gospel is the core of Christian living.
It has within it a contemplative dimension.
This dimension is God’s invitation to every human being, through Jesus Christ, to share God’s very nature.
It begins as a way of listening with ears, eyes, and heart.
It grows as a desire to know God and to enter into God’s love.
This is made possible by a dying to self or emptying to self that becomes a radical emptying to God and experience of God’s love.
Through a pattern of abiding in God that we call contemplative prayer, a change of consciousness takes place.
This dynamic sharing of God’s nature forms each person and opens them to the mind and very life of Christ, challenging them to be instruments of God’s love and energy in the world.
This contemplative consciousness bonds each person in a union with God and with all other persons.
It enables them to find God present in all things.

What’s striking about this statement is that the word “silence” isn’t mentioned even once. Instead, what these mature contemplatives set their sights on is the radical transformation of the person! Contemplative practice for them is fundamentally about a change in consciousness that enables the practitioner to see and participate in the very nature of Christ. It is a bold way of saying “yes” to the profound invitation of Ephesians 3:18–19: “. . . that rooted and grounded in love [you] may come to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ—that you may be filled with the very nature of God.”

You would think, being contemplative masters, that these group members would specify how much and what kind of silence constitutes a minimum prerequisite for transformation. But they don’t. Contemplative prayer itself is merely loosely defined as “a pattern of abiding in God.” The thing that actually does the trick is “the dying to self or emptying to self that is a radical opening to God.” Nor does contemplation have anything to do with “a life apart” or even, as in that celebrated motto of the hermit path, “separated from all, but united to all.” Here it is simply “united to all.” Whether that unity is lived out in physical reclusion or in the trenches doesn’t really matter; it’s the union that counts. What makes this statement so interesting is that it displaces just about every available sacred cow that would allow us to think of contemplative prayer as some sort of “life apart,” at the opposite extreme from a life of action or Christian engagement.

If anything it’s just the opposite.
Contemplative prayer, when it becomes full and mature, doesn’t widen the gap between prayer and life; it narrows it.

Both prayer and life flow out of and give authentic expression to that same “dying to self or emptying to self that is a radical opening to God.”

Along the learning curve silence is useful, of course, but not for the reason that most of us might think. It’s not that silence is in itself pious, holy, or closer to God. We tend to picture God as a wild, wary thing, at home only in the ineffable; if we’re extremely silent, he may cautiously approach. But it’s not like this at all. The reality is that God is always present, and we’re the ones who are absent! We hide in the cataphatic: in our noise, our stories, our self-talking, our busyness. Silence is useful in that it takes away the evasions; it forces us to befriend our own consciousness and stop running from our own shadows. Once that willingness has been found—the willingness simply to endure ourselves in the present moment—then the external conditions of silence become much less important. I’ve seen Thomas Keating do his Centering Prayer in the middle of an airline terminal! On the other hand, without that consent to fully inhabit ourselves, even silence itself will soon get piled high with rules, self-decisions, rigidity, and piety; it becomes itself a form of evasion.

What in most people begins as an “attraction to silence” is really, at root, a desire to end the evasion. Like the character Ged in the novel A Wizard of Earthsea, silence heralds the dawning inner recognition that the thing you’ve been running from all your life is really you; you have to turn and embrace it. That fundamental turn is what contemplative life is built on and what silence celebrates and honors: the realization that who and what you are can neither be exhausted nor fulfilled in that endless cycle of doing, running, desiring, and demanding. As Jesus so long ago taught, “The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.”

Of course, when you’re first trying to establish a meditation practice (and for a long while afterward), it looks like a huge arm-wrestle with time: trying to find a way to shoehorn those one or two periods of Centering Prayer into a day already overscheduled and overcommitted. I remember an introductory workshop I once taught where one of the participants was a young mother of three preschoolers. When I went through the talk on how Centering Prayer is about letting go of all thoughts, she remarked, “I’m going to be a natural at this! I haven’t had a thought in years!” But the promise contemplative prayer makes is that if you show up, things will start to change. Not in the way you expect, of course, but change they will. That “thing” you embraced when you stopped fleeing will begin to quicken within you. And while everybody’s journey is different, the general direction—as those contemplative elders made clear—is that rather than pulling you out of life, it will deposit you back in the midst of it, with a soft and warm heart and a deepening sense of wonder.
The goal of contemplative life is unitive seeing: not so much “union with God” understood as wanting God to the exclusion of all else, but rather, gradually coming to realize that really, there is nothing that is not God.

God is the higher and the lower, the dots and the spaces between the dots; nothing can fall out of God, and all is tenderly and joyously held. To see this is to behold the Kingdom here and now and to be in constantly renewed immediacy with the source of your own true abundance. The goal of the contemplative life, then, is to make “beautiful Christians”: those with the insight and the inner flexibility to flow into life in any and all circumstances knowing that the fountainhead is love. For me this has everything to do with the Church.

What I am suggesting here (and of course, what those contemplative elders were driving at, too) is that the contemplative dimension, thus repositioned away from the traditional stereotypes of cloistered monasteries, gobs of silence, and otherworldliness, is really Christianity’s missing “path”: its way of getting from here to there. Contemplative prayer reflects a long and noble lineage of Christians who have attempted to “put on the mind of Christ”—not just through outer works or even “faith alone,” but through a radical transformation of consciousness that produces the Kingdom as its fruit. Applying Jesus’ teaching that “a house divided against itself cannot stand,” they have striven to heal their own divided and warring consciousnesses and bring their lives into an inner alignment through which it becomes possible to actually follow the teachings of Christ (which are in fact pitched to a level of consciousness higher than the egoic) and to live them into reality with integrity and grace. Ever since that first great contemplative “experiment” in the deserts of Egypt and Syria, the goal has been radical transformation of the human person in service of the Kingdom. It doesn’t require an “introverted temperament”—only honesty, commitment, and a good sense of humor. From these three raw ingredients, great saints can be fashioned.

The contemporary theologian Marcus Borg has made a fascinating suggestion: that the word metanoia, commonly translated as “repent,” actually means to “go beyond the mind,” or “go into the larger mind.” In a nutshell this is what the contemplative journey is all about. The wager is that when we actually enter that larger mind, our “apophatic,” or spiritual mind, we discover that it is neither empty nor a void; it dances with the living water of love, tumbling as it has from time out of time, in that great perichoresis of Father—Son—Holy Spirit through which the “love that moves the stars and the sun” is generated and sustained.
At the center of our own being is Being itself, and in this we are ultimately sustained and come to know ourselves as we truly are.

I end this book where I began it: nearly half a century ago, as a young child sitting in Quaker meeting. In the profundity yet utter simplicity of that silent worship, my Christian life began. Somehow, with an eloquence I have never forgotten, I met and came to know in that silence the vine that all the branches went down into. Perhaps because of that early imprinting, I have always thought of contemplative prayer first and foremost as worship in community. While it is often, perhaps even typically, practiced alone or in small home gatherings, I believe that its true home is the Church, the steward in this world of the intertwining mysteries of kenosis and perichoresis. If I have spent so much time in this book trying to allay the fears and hesitation of Christians who might regard this prayer as in any way alien, it is because I have seen with my own eyes the beauty and power of the Christianity that emerges when the two streams are reunited and lived together as a single whole. Silence and the Word: healing, transforming, creating in the full vibrancy of love.

Cynthia Bourgeault has taught and studied in a number of Benedictine monasteries in the United States and Canada. An Episcopal priest, she is well known as a retreat and conference leader, teacher of prayer, and writer on the spiritual life. She is the author of a number of books, including Mystical Hope.

Taken from the back cover of her book: Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening.
Sacred Presence


Spiritual Re-Reading

Waking from a dream of separateness...

Take time to reflect on the questions below. Return to the article and highlight any words or phrases that capture your attention.

Self-Emptying Prayer    Making Room for Presence

• When have you experienced a sense of mystical awareness—when the separations fell away and you became conscious of “the oneness of all things?”
• How does this kind of awareness affect your connection to suffering, alienation and injustice in the world?

Out-Pouring Love    A Way of Being IN the World

How has your daily practice of quiet prayerful presence affected:
• the way you receive or welcome the world…
• the way you attend to the key relationships in your life…
• your responses to neighbors near or far…
• the way you engage the social crises of our time…
• the people who cross your path, at work, at your outreach ministry?

How has keeping silence with the people in your group impacted your connection to one another?

Radical Emptying    Abiding in God

• Who helps you not be so full of your self so there’s room for a broader, deeper mind?
• What happens when you stop running around and accept the invitation to be still?
• How does making space for God make room for the vulnerable life in your care?

Compassionate Living    The Fruit of Contemplation

• What images of God are highlighted by this understanding of contemplative presence?
• What Gospel stories, words or images come to mind?

…to be instruments of God’s love and energy in the world.

After re-reading the chapter, respond to ANY of these questions in your journal.