



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“Be Still and Know”

Excerpted from

Heartfulness: Transformation in Christ

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Flowers: Many people get confused when they think about prayer. They think it means talking all the time to God. But Centering Prayer seems to be different. Centering Prayer seems to be something mainly concerned with silence, which you say is the language of God.

Keating: Centering Prayer came out of a desire to renew and recover and reclaim the Christian contemplative tradition. It could just be called “contemplative prayer.” It doesn’t have to be called Centering Prayer. The problem was at the time Centering Prayer appeared was that contemplation had taken on several different meanings, maybe five or six meaning including opposing meanings. Sometimes it referred to looking at something, actually like contemplating a tree, or mentally contemplating some action or memory or plan or any work of the imagination. It is usually an object in this sense. The classical meaning of contemplation, comes out of Matthew 6:6, and which Jesus calls ‘prayer in secret,’ is about a deepening relationship that involves first of all an intention to converse with God, or to open to God and consent to the presence of God. And then moves on to listen to God.

Listening is an act of silence of sorts. You cannot hear what somebody else is saying if it’s too noisy or you are talking. The idea of prayer as relationship emerges as the essence of the practice, which can then be expressed in many different ways. The classical ways of praying are petition: asking for things; adoration: responding to God’s transcendence and goodness; and responding in gratitude to the good things we receive from God or the good things we hear about in scripture. A desire to express trust or love in this mystery that is laid before us in scripture or in some other way. Prayers are any of these things. But prayer itself might best be reserved for a basic disposition of relationship towards God, based on one’s present level of communion, conversation or at-ease-ness with God in your ordinary life. If you are scared to death of God, then you have a relationship to God, but it’s not a very appealing one. It tends to make us want to run away, or to postpone this to another time.

Little by little we enter into prayer without intentionality except to consent. Consent becomes surrender. And surrender becomes total receptivity, as this process evolves. And total receptivity is without effort—it is effortless. It is peaceful. It is free. It has nothing to do with attaining something, or getting anything, or the desire for enlightenment, the desire for peace, or the desire for spiritual experience. All this is still ego, however devoutly masked. So, no thinking, no reflection, no desires, no words. No thing.

Everything is impermanent, which is another way of saying everything is changing. That is the very nature of reality. Or to put it another way, God is not a noun. A better metaphor would be a verb. That is, he is always happening. Hence the thing that doesn't change about God is that he is always changing. What Centering Prayer is doing is trying to adapt us to this mystery of the Ultimate Reality by gradually persuading us to change and to let go of everything that prevents us from doing so.

It is not a question of doing anything but of being for these 20 minutes, or whatever the time is. When this is challenged by the usual flow of thoughts which are inevitable, we simply, quietly, without being annoyed or distressed, return to our original intention by some symbol. Which has no inherent value in itself; but is simply a way of renewing or rejoining our consciousness or attentiveness to the general loving presence that we are calling God.

As a practical disposition, when one sits down in Centering Prayer, our teaching is that this is a time to have no judgment about anything, at all. No judgment about the period of prayer and its psychological content; still less about what's happening in the world; and still less about your judgement of other people or circumstances. All judgment, all that kind of reflection, is not appropriate for the time of Centering Prayer, which is a time of sharing one's pure being with God. It is not time for action. It is a time for receptivity. It's a time for consenting to whatever IS at this present moment. It is an exercise of the present moment; of being with God totally in the present moment.

All you have to do is stop being who you think you are and you couldn't be more delightful. Because there's nothing more beautiful than the uniqueness that God has created. It's just buried like a diamond underneath a pile of garbage or something else. That is not God's fault, but the misuse of our freedom and the imposition on us of all the negative forces in the environment and in our heredity and our social milieu. It is a job to climb out of those influences. But all the work is in letting go of those influences and not reinforcing them. You don't have to create the beauty—you've got the beauty. You don't have to create the freedom—you've got it. You don't have to create the image of God in you—you have it. You don't have to win over God's love—you have more than you know what to do with. You don't have to become more beautiful because nothing could be more beautiful than your own, particular uniqueness.