

LEARNING THE WAY OF SILENT PRAYER:
THE PRACTICE OF CENTERING PRAYER

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For most people prayer means words. We are familiar with liturgical prayers recited in the cycle of corporate worship. We share in intercessory and healing prayers in which the deepest needs of our hearts are presented to God. Or we join in the extemporaneous prayer of the informal prayer meeting. But, from the earliest years of Christian tradition, a form of prayer has been practiced that does not depend on words.

The practice of silent prayer finds its roots in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The prophet Habakkuk counselled his congregation that, upon encountering God, there is only one appropriate response. The prophet declared, “the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!” (Habakkuk 2:20) Isaiah said simply, “Sit in silence.” (Isaiah 47:5)

The Gospels do not contain a lot of teaching that relates directly to the practice of prayer. In one of the few places that gives direct instruction about how prayer should be conducted Jesus utters a stern warning saying, “When you are praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words.” (Matthew 6:7) Instead Jesus says, “whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” (Matthew 6:6)

In the fourth century the Christian monk John Cassian travelled to the deserts of Egypt where he uncovered a deep tradition of spirituality and Christian practice. Cassian discovered that the desert fathers and mothers understood Jesus’ recommendation to “go into your room and shut the door” to mean that we should “withdraw our hearts completely from the clatter of every thought and concern.”¹ This led the desert mystics to discover a way of “wordless prayer,” that “transcends all human understanding and is distinguished not, I would say, by a sound of the voice or a movement of the tongue or a pronunciation of words.”²

This discipline of “wordless prayer” has carried on as a deep, sometimes hidden stream within Christian practice down to the present day. In the over-stimulated culture of the twenty-first century in which we are barraged by words, images, sounds, and information, the practice of “wordless prayer” is perhaps more essential than at any other time in history. This prayer of silence offers the opportunity to step aside for a moment from the demands, pressures and tensions of daily life. It enables us to simply rest in the presence of God who, through the prophet Jeremiah, called all people to “Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.” (Jeremiah 6:16)

¹ John Cassian *The Conferences* trans. Boniface Ramsey, O.P (New York: Newman Press, 1997), p. 353.

² *Ibid.*, p. 345.

One way of following “the ancient path” of silent trusting prayer is through a practice known as Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer was pioneered by the Trappist monks of St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts. In the 1970’s Thomas Keating, at that time abbot of St. Joseph’s, became concerned that the practice of silent prayer had been lost to the church. He challenged his monks to study Christian tradition to see if they could discover a method of silent prayer.

In the anonymous fourteenth century Christian spiritual classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the monks of Spencer came across a spirituality and an accompanying practice that they believed might enable contemporary Christians to develop a practice of silent prayer. The author of *The Cloud* defined prayer as “nothing else than a devout intention directed toward God.”³ This “intention” he suggested was expressed through the use of “but a little word of one syllable.” This word is used he says to “beat upon the cloud and the darkness, which are above you” and to “strike down thoughts of every kind and drive them beneath the cloud of forgetting,” until we simply “rest ourselves with full pleasure and consent ultimately in God.”⁴

Paul in I Thessalonians, instructed his readers to “pray without ceasing.” (I Thessalonians 5:16) If we understand prayer primarily in verbal terms, it is difficult to understand how Paul intended this direction to be followed. If, however, we view prayer as the author of *The Cloud* implies, as resting in God’s presence, the counsel to “pray without ceasing,” means simply to be always aware of and trust in God’s presence. The 11th or 12th century monk St. Peter of Damaskos, whose writings take up more space in *The Philokalia* than any other except St. Maximos the Confessor, says, “‘Pray without ceasing,’ that is, to be mindful of God at all times, in all places, and in every circumstance.”⁵

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams says, “The end of the life of grace is to find God in every experience and activity, to be ‘everywhere at home.’”⁶ This never failing awareness of God’s presence is the deepest longing of the human heart. This consciousness begins to emerge in the practitioner’s life as we follow the discipline of Centering Prayer. As we rest daily in God’s presence in silent prayer, we begin to discover that an awareness of God’s presence permeates more and more of our lives. We find ourselves trusting in God’s faithfulness in circumstances where we might previously have been tempted to panic, struggle for control, or fight back against forces in the world we perceive as hostile to our well-being.

Centering Prayer patterns into our lives the central gesture of Christian faith summed up by Jesus when he prayed to God saying, “not what I want but what you want.” (Matthew 26:39) This gesture of surrender is the ground upon which all relationship with God is

³ Anonymous *The Cloud of Unknowing* trans. Ira Progoff (New York: Delta Books, 1957), p. 151.

⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

⁵ St. Peter of Damaskos in *The Philokalia* vol. III trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 173

⁶ Rowan Williams *The Wound of Knowledge* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1980), p. 134.

built. It is the tone set at the beginning of the Gospels by Mary who, when visited by a messenger of God, replied to his strange announcement saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) As we practice, letting go again and again of the thoughts and distractions that obsess us in our lives, we repeat the great *fiat*, “let it be” of the Christian life, until gradually this becomes our instinctive response.

We open our hearts to life as it is and, in so doing, discover God at the heart of all existence. There is no longer any need for words. We stand with the prophet knowing that “the Lord is in his holy temple.” We are that temple and therefore, we can “keep silence” before him. Our hearts are content, fed with the presence of the Divine who dwells at the centre of our being, fed by the eternal nourishment of God’s indwelling Spirit. This is the goal towards which all our strivings have guided us. This is the place of rest and peace, that Jesus promised all who trust in him when he said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

Centering Prayer leads to that place within ourselves which T.S. Eliot describes as the place where we discover that “the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.”⁷ We carry within us that for which we long. All our striving leads us to stop and rest in the awareness of that which was ours from the beginning.

Underlying the practice of Centering Prayer, is the fundamental conviction that human beings are created “in the image of God.” (Genesis 1:27) We may have lost sight of this image. We may have lost our awareness of this “image of God” dwelling at the centre of our being; but it has not been obliterated. The challenge of the spiritual journey is to awaken to an awareness of this reality.

The great French Orthodox theologian, Olivier Clement says, “According to the Fathers, the fall impaired the capacity of creatures to see the divine light, but did not destroy it. The universal aspiration towards God has, it is true, become a ‘groaning,’ a ‘sight of creation,’ but it is still prayer which is the essential activity of all created things.”⁸ The very desire to pray itself, is proof that God’s Spirit is already at work with in us. This work may be only a vague inarticulate “groaning,” but the presence of the urge to pray is the stirring of God in our hearts.

The archetypal picture of this “groaning” that is prayer occurs in Luke’s Gospel. When the prodigal son found himself lost in a distant country, Luke says, “he came to himself.” (Luke 15:17) He awoke to his true nature. This awakening made possible his renewed awareness of his fundamental union with his father, who declared to his elder son, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” (Luke 15:31) Centering Prayer awakens us to reality of God’s presence at the heart of all being. It opens us to a restored

⁷ T.S. Eliot *Four Quartets* “Little Gidding” *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930), p. 145.

⁸ Olivier Clement *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New York: New City Press, 1993), p. 27.

awareness of our true identity. Thomas Keating says, “Centering Prayer is designed to withdraw our attention from the ordinary flow of our thoughts. We tend to identify ourselves with that flow. But there is deeper part of ourselves. This prayer opens our awareness to the spiritual level of our being.”⁹ Our true identity as beings created in the image of God lies in the depths of “the spiritual level of our being.” In Centering Prayer we open to this depth of being and discover our true nature.

The great Christian spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill says, “That there is an extreme point at which man’s nature touches the Absolute: that his ground or substance, his true being, is penetrated by the Divine Life which constitutes the underlying reality of things; this is the basis on which the whole mystic claim of possible union with God must rest.”¹⁰ To discover our true nature, we must open to our inner depths wherein God is known.

The Psalmist says, “Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10) The English translation consists of eight words and seems to suggest that if you can be still you will learn something. The Hebrew original requires only three words. In Hebrew the Psalmist says, “Rapha Yada Elohiym.” “Rapha” can be translated as “sink down,” “Yada” is “know” in the intimate, vulnerable, open way Adam is said to have “known” Eve. So, the Psalmist is guiding us to “Sink down; know God.” Open to that inner most depth that is the unique birthright of those beings who are created in the image of God and you will know the presence of God at the centre of your being.

This is the journey of the Christian life. This is the well-spring from which true love will flow. This awareness of the divine dimension of all life grows in the silence of resting in God. It is nurtured by the continual return to God that is practiced in the daily discipline of Centering Prayer.

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⁹ Thomas Keating *Open Mind Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (New York: Continuum, 1986), p. 34.

¹⁰ Evelyn Underhill *Mysticism* (NY: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1961), p. 55.