

A Fresh Perspective on Centering Prayer with Cynthia Bourgeault By Heather Ruce and Jeanine Siler-Jones

Heather: Thank you so much, Cynthia, for joining us for a conversation about centering prayer.

We're just going to jump right in with a few questions to just get a fresh perspective of where you're at with this practice now and to bring our community into that.

Jeanine: In today's spiritual and religious landscape, people are actively reinterpreting everything related to God, not least of all how to define God.

But in centering prayer, we are not praying to God exactly.

Can you speak to why it is less important who, what we pray to, but rather that we can find the capacity within ourselves to intentionally bow down and release into the exchange of prayer?

Cynthia: Well, centering prayer for a long, long time has worked on a paradox that in its ambience, I think intrinsically, deeply prayerful and does sort of recognize that meditation, contemplation, any of these kinds of disciplines is not simply a technique, but a relationship.

And it doesn't matter whether you use the God word or a word of your own choosing, the divine being, the source of all intelligence, the creator, whatever word you use is really not material.

But it's the active and intuitive inner yearning to come into a relationship, a direct relationship with that which is the deeper and sustaining reality of our existence.

There's a conviction and it can be really kind of intuitive, not explicit and articulate, that there's more to our reality than to meaning than meets the eye.

And that we are in relationship and in our deepest insides, deeply familiar with some sort of an inner ground.

And so centering prayer is really about creating the space in which to form a relationship, a meeting place with that deeper ground, which normally gets blocked by our overly wordy and transactional and concept laden images of God.

We think of prayer as petition and praise, basically, that's what we're taught to do in our tradition.

So to understand that it can be a silent relationship, not communicated or experienced in words or theories or transactions, but in just a common interbeing is new.

But Thomas Keating was already on to that way back in his earliest presentations of centering prayer as relationship with God.

But relationship he used as his chief image for this, an older married couple that had been married for 50, 60 years, they didn't say much to each other.

They just sat on the porch together at dusk and took in the sunset because the relationship had grown so much larger and deeper than a bunch of words conveyed in a direction.

So the way centering prayer really works is that a lot of the problem, whether you call it God or the direct source or the power of my being or my higher power or whatever you call it, is that as long as the way our language works and the way our brain is wired, as soon as we address something to something, we make them an object outside ourself.

It's the operating system that our brain comes with installed, and we will use it until we learn how to be in a different kind of an operating system.

And what centering prayer does that I find is actually so miraculous is that it directly addresses the question of changing the operating system by cutting out for the duration of the prayer all subject-object thinking.

A thought in centering prayer is defined as anything that brings your attention to a focal point.

It's not just a concept.

It can be an itch on your nose, but if your attention starts focusing on it, that's a thought.

And the training in centering prayer is to let all thoughts go regardless of content.

Thomas used to shock people by saying, "Even if the Blessed Virgin were to appear in person before you during your centering prayer and offer to extract that wound from your side, the answer is, 'Not now, dearie, I'm doing my centering prayer.'"

So what he's really teaching people is to learn how to get used to living in that kind of liminal zone of awareness between where there's no thoughts and there's no thinking, but there's still bright awareness.

It's just not going out to objects.

And the theory is, it was his intuition and his own deep experience, but it's being increasingly confirmed by modern neuroscience that that configuration actually is the gateway and the catalyst to a new kind of perception, non-dual awareness or objectless

awareness – it's often called in the traditions – that does open up a capacity for this deeper kind of inter-being relationship that gets blocked by the very structure, the very soft wiring of our usual brains.

Heather: Thank you, Cynthia.

There can still be confusion sometimes around the difference between centering prayer as a practice and various types of Eastern meditation practices.

I think you were getting to the essence of what centering prayer is just now.

And you've mentioned before that even Thomas Keating struggled to find some of the precise language to articulate the difference between these kinds of meditation practices.

Can you speak to the uniqueness of centering prayer as an apathetic act of kenosis in solidarity with Christ on the cross, as opposed to a program of noticing thoughts?

Cynthia: Well, I may have been the one who kicked Thomas most strongly in that direction.

I'm not sure of that, but I may have been.

I know I was a contributing influence.

When I finally got that myself after a decade of struggling with what I found to be the very confusing early instructions.

Thomas was not sure – he wasn't at the beginning – whether to present centering prayer as an awareness practice or something else.

And he kind of went back and forth in the cracks between them.

He has one very, very powerful and influential metaphor of that centering prayer is like a little diver sitting down on the bottom of the water in the ocean, watching thoughts and thoughts, boat holds float by above him.

So that's basically an awareness practice.

But then he always got hung up on, well, you don't need to use the centering prayer constantly, but you only use it when you are aware you're being caught by a thought.

But the catch-22 in this is how can you be aware that you're being caught with a thought without that being a thought?

And if you think about whether should I return to my sacred word now to wipe away this thought – isn't that just another thought?

And he could never, never kind of get himself out of that knot.

He tried this and that.

And sometimes he got thoroughly nailed by more sort of traditional teachers of meditation, Eastern practices, for teaching a sort of failed meditation practice that went between a concentrative method and a receptive method without being clear about which was which.

So after sort of struggling with that myself for a decade, trying to say, "Is this a thought? Should I watch the thinker who's thinking the thought? Should I think?"

You know, and getting closer and closer down those circles, I finally realized that the whole emphasis on the prayer was not on clearing my own mind, but on learning to release the thought.

It was a prayer, it was a teaching and a practice that was done on the back end.

It wasn't really concerned about whether you got caught by thoughts or not.

It was really concerned about showing you how to release them promptly when you get caught by them, which is exactly what the mind can't do usually.

And from there, it was a pretty quick move to St. Paul, and you should have in yourself the same mind as was seen in Christ.

That although his state was that of God, yet he did not deem equality with God something he should cling to, but rather he emptied himself.

In other words, the essence of the mind of Christ is not clinging to anything, but learning to release it.

And that is, as you've said, Heather, the term, the concept that's met in the word kenosis.

Kenosis is the Greek word for self-emptying, and it means exactly that simple action of letting go and releasing.

It's not some great state of having no thoughts or no nothing. It's not soniata. It's a simple act of releasing.

And as soon as I recognized this was the mind, this was actually the royal road to the putting on of the mind of Christ, the simple learning to release what your mind is clinging onto and grasping onto and insisting onto, it all came together in a whole new way.

I saw how this prayer, not only in theory, but in the actual practice I was seeing in my own life and in other people's life, was a laboratory, a gymnasium for a good workout of this muscle of letting go, letting go, letting go.

Thomas used to like to say to people who complained that they had 10,000 thoughts during their prayer time, how lovely, 10,000 opportunities to return to God.

So I don't know whether I was the first one to cotton on to it or he was the one who cottoned on to it or it was just in the air, but it was like we suddenly almost simultaneously came up with the same insight that Centering Prayer is not something you take to build yourself up, but something you learn to give, to offer in solidarity with that deepest offering of self, of Christ to the cross.

And the way you practice that during the prayer time is thought by thought by thought by thought.

Thought comes up, you let it go. Thought comes up, you let it go. Thought comes up, you let it go.

It's pretty boring when you're looking for great, vast states of enlightenment and bliss, but when you realize that you're patterning in the action of prompt release and that this has considerable carryover value in the world, then it puts a whole different spin on it and ties it even more closely to Christic and canonic reference points and devotional points.

So that you can certainly do Centering Prayer without being a Christian, but within the Christian theological and devotional milieu, it suddenly stops feeling like maybe this strange practice imparted from other spiritual traditions and begins to feel intrinsically like a deep unwrap and practice, a self-offering practice, leading to a deeper and deeper participation in the mind of Christ.

Heather: Thank you, Cynthia.

And along those lines, Thomas Keating talked about consenting to God, the divine therapist, who would in a sense heal us in our unconscious during the practice, but you're talking about something different.

And I'm wondering if you can speak a little to that, how you might use a different metaphor or if you could expound on what's actually happening in Centering Prayer, or do you find value in seeing that we are consenting to God, the divine therapist who's healing us during that time?

Cynthia: Well, as I said, Thomas first put together what he called his cognitive framework during the 1980s, and it had a very, very psychotherapeutic slant to it.

And he did work deeply into that when he discovered that meditation, like in any tradition, has a powerful capacity to engage and uncover the unconscious.

And this was even more so in Centering Prayer because of its extremely gentle and receptive attitude.

And so his initial thought was to go to town with this, and he created this elaborate schematic of how as we sit in Centering Prayer in this deeply receptive, gentle, non-possessive, non-grabbing, non-fearful, trusting atmosphere, which he means by the word consent, and as we allow our deepest inner shadow stuff to be exposed and gently healed, that there is a healing, and that a lot of this does take place during the time of meditation.

He very soon needed to add in and did in the cautions around this, that this has to be also strenuously accompanied by practical actions in life, and also by, in times, engaging in actual psychotherapy with the aid of a therapist to help deal with shadow material.

You just can't sit there on your prayer cushion 20 minutes twice a day and expect to be healed of the trauma of a lifetime.

But he did see it as a very, very strong first step in that direction, in the direction of healing, and also as the linchpin throughout the whole process, because that continued turning faithfully to that inner consent, to be able to sit there for 20 minutes twice a day, not grabbing onto subjects and objects, letting things flow out, was a wonderful stance that encouraged the healing process.

So people still highly regard this teaching.

There's little bits and pieces of it that may read a bit dated now, and certainly it's on the more simple end of the psychological scale.

But you're both psychological professionals, you're both therapists, and over the course of time it has stood the course of time.

My own particular interests, and it's just in the place where I plug into the network, have less to do with personal healing and therapy, and more to do with the transformation of consciousness, with the evolutionary models, and with the converting inner experience into skillful action in the world.

That's where I'm fascinated, and I've always found personally useful to stay close to the interface between centering prayer, which is such a deep and unreserved self-offering practice.

And some of the mindfulness practices that are around from the Gurdjieff work, from mindfulness training and other places, that encourage us and in fact impel us to watch how the rubber is hitting the road, and how the attitudes of inner consent and letting go make possible a deeper and sort of less frightened attention that can actually observe from within with impartiality and participate in adjusting behavior in the direction of real communication and effective action, not simply self-expression and introspection.

Jeanine; Yeah, that's really helpful, Cynthia.

It kind of leads naturally into this next question, because you're talking about the rubber hitting the road.

And so part of what we were interested in asking you is like, practically, how do we take our centering prayer practice off our prayer cushion into life's situations?

You know, am I working with noticing my reactions, or am I learning how to let them go, or both?

And how have you seen in your own experience or in your students that the practice of centering prayer slowly starts to shift a person's habitual ways of being in the world?

Cynthia: Well, Thomas Keating was on to that right from the very start.

He said that centering prayer is, the fruits of centering prayer are experienced not on the prayer cushion, but in daily life.

And he said that it's typically others who notice it first, that you're becoming more flexible, lower maintenance, less insistent.

And I think over the 40 years or so that centering prayer has been taught and transmitted, that this tends to be an overwhelming pattern, that people generally, and sometimes in remarkably short times, do learn that that letting go that they practice on the prayer cushion just by letting go of thoughts.

And sometimes sort of saying, "It's only for 20 minutes, I can obsess for the remaining 23 hours of the day."

That nonetheless, something begins to shift in the inside.

So a lot of that happens spontaneously.

And the real question is how to facilitate that and to build on it in other ways and even more direct and robust ways.

So in 40 years now of working with my left hand, working with centering prayer, and my right hand working with the Gurdjieff work, or maybe it's the other way around, I've come to believe strongly that the two joysticks in the spiritual journey are attention and surrender, and that you need both of them.

You need a deeply grounded and unreserved capacity to give, to surrender, to let go.

You also need a deep capacity to pull it in, to concentrate, to focus, to pay attention, and not just have your attention pulled.

And you need some sort of method of actually being able to carry attentive states into the body and to begin to see that the work of being a healing and a transformative presence, a beacon of a new consciousness, is carried not so much in the words you say and perfect, but in a way of being present that Gurdjieff called three-centered, that really comes into the room with a different kind of energy, more grounded and balanced, and constellates around it a different set of happenings.

So I work them both, being very clear about what belongs where.

In centering prayer, of course, you don't stop, analyze, measure, and observe your thoughts.

The centering prayer is the 20 minutes twice a day for the simply giving back of the concept, giving back.

That's what it's for.

And I find that it's terribly unhelpful to try and mix that motion in all its purity with any other motion.

So I let centering prayer per se sit on its own.

I will usually access it by the classic pathways of chanting the psalms, chanting a song, you know, the classic sort of contemplative devotional practices, because it warms the heart in a way that allows it to quietly open, consent as Thomas called it, to this unknown but deep presence.

So that's how I go in on that track.

And then I will do the exercises, the embodied practices, the mindfulness practices throughout the day or at different sets, because I think they are both indispensable.

Without attention and an ability to focus it, centering prayer and surrender practices can wander off into introspection and fantasy and just a general sort of inner slackness that doesn't notice.

And without that deep willingness to surrender and yield it all back, attention practices can become hard and brittle and even self-important.

But between the two of them in a wonderful undulating pattern, they create a rhythm which I almost like to think of as the breathing of God.

Heather; That is very helpful, Cynthia.

And what I'm hearing you say basically is that these are a polarity.

I think I've even heard you say two sides of the river, both being river, one bank of each river, or two wings on the same bird, that we need both attention and surrender.

And what I'm hearing you also say there is that it's important to find the practices that cultivate both of those and do both of them.

So making centering prayer as well as some of these other practices that cultivate attention or will or that "I am" or agency.

So how do you work with that?

Would you say practically you work with that in the same day?

You know, a lot of times people wonder, do I do them back to back?

What does that practically look like?

Cynthia: I think it varies for each individual, depending on the amount of time you actually have in your day to devote to spiritual practice specifically, depending on your personality and temperament, and depending on where you are in your own polarity.

A.H. Almas was one of the first to suggest really brilliantly that a right practice at the wrong time is a wrong practice.

We all slide, no matter who we are, through times when we need more surrender and times when we need more attention.

And part of being able to hold the whole thing as a polarity rather than as a particular method that you're identified with is that it allows you to actually experience and adjust to this polarity.

So for me, I don't know exactly how to describe it, but I like to begin and end my days in the quiet, in the gathered receiving and giving back of Centering Prayer.

And during the middle parts of the day I like to work, you know, very carefully, you know, and diligently with some of the particularly the profound material coming to us from the Gurdjieff exercises that really call us to a deeper awareness of how currents of life flow through the body and out into the world that calls us to three-centered awareness and knowing how to pay attention to how we're moving in the world and how people are responding to that movement so we don't just go along acting as if we're the only player on the stage.

And it finds its rhythm and I've determined, I finally, probably about five years ago, really gave up altogether on trying to choose one or the other.

I said, "Until one of them permanently boots me out, we'll just let the polarity, let the weaving continue."

And I'm beginning to discover now as I reach sort of the end of my seventies and I'm in conversation with some really respected elders in both ends of the tradition, that for them too there's the experience that at some point it all comes together, that even the "I am" that is such a cardinal declaration in the Gurdjieffian tradition begins to widen and expand and soften and let some transparent light in, some trans-realmic or transfigured light come through.

And it goes like that, that I believe that both paths are holy and God-given and can't really exist without the other, just like you can have an in-breath without an out-breath or a day without a night.

So I will follow the rhythm until instructed otherwise.

Jeanine: That's really wonderful and encouraging for how we engage both of these practices ourselves.

Are you okay going with a couple more questions, Cynthia?

Cynthia: Sure.

Jeanine: We have another question that we wanted to ask.

In Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, you write about resting in the silence, simply to be in the silence, not to grab a message from it.

And I love hearing you describe how you begin and end your day in the silence.

For a generation that has been indoctrinated into journaling and believing that we are always on a spiritual journey of gaining new transformational insights, can you speak again to why we don't want to extract more from the silence, but just simply resting in it, being in it?

Cynthia: Because the you that's concerned about all the extracting is ultimately not the you that's going to survive your own first body.

Everything depends really on learning to recognize and finally rest in a deeper self that does lie latent within you and beyond you, that inner being zone that we talked about in the very first questions, that greater spaciousness.

And the thing that most gets in the way of it is any inner grabbing.

And you are quite right that in one of my major pet peeves with so much of the psychotherapeutic industry is that it tends to reify the spiritual journey to cap it at the level of high egoic functioning.

So you can't move beyond.

And all this journaling and writing and reading and collecting and all that sort of spiritual materialism stuff, if you want to use that language, reflects high egoic functioning and can allow you certainly to function as a more articulate inner self-aware person.

But until you can kick through that attitude of having to grab it and own it and maintain it and teach it and spread it and transcend it and be an important little bee in the great network, the great hive of divine reality, you're stuck.

You're stuck. Your ego is a good servant. But to think that it's the one that's being transformed is folly.

And so all I really ask of people is during the time of Centering Prayer, just do it and don't grab afterwards.

Don't use it as an uncovering technique because it will uncover itself and reveal itself in your actions.

And the more we learn that precious attitude of spiritual non-possessiveness, the more we help the journey that actually leads onward to the full realization and ability to finally to plant our nest firmly in the branches of that higher and undivided belongingness which characterizes the next level of consciousness attained.

Heather: Thank you so much.

This will be our final question for you, Cynthia.

I've heard you say that Thomas Keating said on his deathbed that there are two things that are going to save the planet, silence and science.

And this seems to reflect themes in your own teachings in which you're helping people understand the spiritual scientific ramifications of Einstein's cosmic vision and then bringing it back to the need for cultivating a personal practice of internal silence and surrender.

So as we come to a close, can you speak to us about the importance of silence in our era of increasing noise and how people can find that amidst the noise perhaps?

Cynthia: Well, I think it's all important because so much of the noise is created in this massive self-evasion, in this enormous flight that the ego self seems to be absolutely intolerant, incapable of tolerating what it considers to be a vacuum and immediately has to fill it with content, projects, busyness, acquisitions, you know how it goes, noise.

Nowadays we've had a culture which has become increasingly noise polluted so that my grandkids find it difficult to imagine what life is like when you leave your cell phone at home, for example, or when you take a long driving trip across the country like I do and don't turn on podcasts.

How can you just sit in the silence and look at things?

And yet silence as I learned it from my own spiritual teachers along the path is a zone of total encounter.

It's where the evasions and the running stop.

I think it was Blaise Pascal who once said that all the violence in the world comes from this, the inability of human beings to sit alone in a room for a single half hour.

And so silence is really the first step in cutting the evasions, cutting the running and simply pulling into a present.

At first it's overwhelming but one of the most beautiful things that Thomas Keating discovered in his own life is that he discovered in the last 30 years of his life, he watched silence gradually and then steadily morphing into presence.

He said, as a matter of fact, you can tell that the contemplative journey has occurred when silence morphs into presence.

And literally toward the end he began to talk about a rising tide of silence he experienced as a volume, as an aliveness, as an intimacy, as an intelligence that wasn't going anywhere, that didn't have to go anywhere, but just was by its very nature.

And he found this absolutely delightful.

And Robert Sardello is another who reached that same sort of beautiful subtle thing that silence is not just an empty space in which nothing is happening.

It's a living more subtle presence coming to meet us, suffuse us, saturate us and finally transform us into it.

And that's beautiful and it's alive.

And as we chop off every possible inroad where that could happen, we consign ourselves to a life below.

We become a kind of artificial intelligence in and of ourselves even though we are still embodied because we fall out of comfortable communion with this larger consciousness that doesn't have to see the world through its own kind of isolated and pixelated viewing platform and can begin to come into and draw its wellsprings from the sheer dynamism of the whole field, which is in its essence, God.

Jeanine: Wow.

What a gift you have given us, Cynthia, of your time and of your wisdom of accumulated practice through these years.

And there's so many nuggets and rich things that you've said that I look forward to returning to and look forward to being able to share with others who are wanting to be doing this practice and looking for the inspiration and motivation to keep with it.

So thank you so much for your time.

Cynthia: Great.

I will add that center and prayer, sometimes it is less prominent and featured in my teachings, but it's never dropped out.

It's still the root of my practice.

And in these upcoming times, as the book on Thomas Keating comes out in the fall of this year, I'm delighted and honored that it provides the occasion for a renewed focus on this foundation.

Both my own personal work and I think of the Wisdom Waypoint's deepest work in spiritual transformation.

It's always there as the groundswell that everything builds on.

So thank you and thank you, Heather, for this opportunity to bring it beautifully into the forefront again and to express our own gratitude and appreciation for this wonderful practice that has set so many people on a whole new journey.

Heather: Thank you.

Jeanine: Great.