
CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE



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ON RETREAT: THE EXPERIENCE OF CENTERING PRAYER

by Tom Ward
University of the South, Sewanee

The following is taken from an article soon to be published by the Sewanee Theological Review on Centering Prayer Retreats.

What can be said about the experience of the prayer itself during the (centering prayer) retreat? It is best compared to an individual session of centering prayer. At first the thoughts that preoccupy me are my most immediate concerns in my ordinary life: issues in my family, my work, the world around me. As the retreat continues, the character of the thoughts become more archetypal and intense; they come from a deeper level: I begin to notice particular manifestations of a desire for power and control, affection and esteem, and security and survival. And I experience a deeper yearning for intimacy with God. Some time near the middle of the retreat I usually am overcome by tears, often not knowing why. As I work with my journal in some of the discretionary time the retreat allows, I sense that God is inviting me to live into words from Matthew I have known all my life:

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CENTERING PRAYER AND SOCIAL ACTION

by Tom Macfie
Otey Memorial Episcopal Church

At a personal level, the most intriguing influence of centering prayer relates to the outreach of the parish and our efforts to respond to the poor. Otey Parish has long sustained a commitment to social justice and issues of economic and social equality. In 1962, under the leadership of the Rev. David Yates, the parish became the first congregation in Tennessee to integrate all aspects of parish life (One of the great stories in the history of Otey Parish relates to a parent's conversation with a child on the day the local elementary school integrated, an event that took place a few years after the integration of the parish. The mother, eager for a response from her child, asked, "Were there any new children at school today?" The child responded, "Just the kids who've been coming to church."). In 1974, under the leadership of Marilyn Powell, the parish formed the Community Action Committee, a ministry of relief and advocacy for the poor. For over 25 years, there has been a close relationship between the parish and the Sewanee chapter of the Episcopal Peace Fellowship. And yet at times in the history of the parish, I would argue that there has been a split between contemplation and social action. While the two are not opposed to one another, they have not often been identified as soul mates. In this particular case, a new relationship between these two causes, these two movements in the church, reveals itself most keenly in the story of one parishioner who has been drawn to centering prayer and work with the poor.

One of the early participants in both centering prayer groups is a woman named Laura Willis. She came to centering prayer as a way to make sense of her own vocational discernment as she moved from a full-time position in university development to the role of a full-time mother seeking to balance that important

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From the editor

What a glorious Spring we have had this year! Actually, Spring came two weeks early for some of us as we went south to Alabama for the retreat with David Frenette at Sacred Heart Monastery. We were called to awaken to the movement of God working in us and invited into a deeper relationship with God. It's most helpful to be gentle with ourselves, when returning to the Sacred Word in Centering Prayer. This leaves the door open for God to act, that is, to take over the prayer. Deeper levels of prayer can come forth with such gentleness. Silence is the container that holds this prayer. Some comparisons for this type of gentleness was: "snow falling on cedars", "a homeward turning love", "a flower opening". In gently returning to the sacred symbol, a deeper part of ourselves will emerge and pray in us and through us without effort or struggle.

David personifies this gentleness. The retreat was a total experience of letting go into God and opening to receive more fully, becoming more aware of God as an experience. We close the door to our thinking mind.

There will be an Introductory Workshop at Penuel Ridge in Ashland City, TN on June 12th. Another workshop is scheduled for May 22nd at the Carmel Center of Spirituality in Liberty, TN.

Keep us informed about Support Group changes of time or place. You may go on line to check out upcoming events and contacts for each event on the Contemplative Outreach national web site at: www.contemplativeoutreach.org or at our southeastern cluster site in Birmingham: www.bham.net/cobweb, or at our local site in Sewanee: www.stmarysretreat.org.

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Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

(Matthew 11:28-30)

I have known the language of justification by grace through faith since my seminary days. But I am inclined to judge my worth as a person on what I do, not on receiving God's love. It is as if God breaks down my defenses in the silence so that I might experience the Reality I know with my mind. Or to use categories that Thomas Keating holds before us, God deconstructs my false self so that my true self might come to birth in the silence. For silence is God's first language. Contemplation is resting in God.

The Eastern Orthodox call such tears of compunction "the second baptism", and I associate this experience with the word "purgation" in the classical tradition of the Christian West. Through such purgation I return to my life in the world lighter, without so much emotional heaviness and freer to respond to the opportunities for service with which my daily life presents me. It is as if the powerful language from Galatians is finding a place in my life:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ⊕

(Galatians 2:20)

CONTEMPLATIVE THOUGHT FOR LIVING

For the early Fathers of the Church there was only one spirituality, the spirituality of Jesus Christ, who died and rose again . . .

CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH PRAYER SUPPORT GROUPS

MIDDLE TENNESSEE

| | | | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| Nashville | Christ Church | Rev. Geoffrey Butcher | 615-255-7729 | Sun 10:00am, Thur noon |
| Nashville | Christ Church | Stuart McCloy | 615-661-4590 | Tue 5:30pm |
| Nashville | St. George | Dr. Carroll Young | 615-385-2150 | Mon 4:45 to 6:15pm |
| Nashville | St. Edward | Patricia Flandell | 615-832-0873 | Wed 11:30am |
| Nashville | Christ the King | Carolyn Goddard | 615-386-3412 | Fri 8:00am |
| Nashville | Home Residence | Sister Eileen Pistor, RSM | 615-463-2776 | Thurs 6:00pm |
| Nashville | St. Augustine's Chapel | Kay Barry | 615-322-7747 | Wed 8:00am |
| Nashville | West End Methodist Church | E. Dan Smith | 615-383-8940 | Wed 5:00pm |
| Antioch | St. Ignatius | Carnie Harmon | 615-834-1259 | Fri 9:00am |
| Antioch | St. Mark | Gretchen Miller | 615-794-6720 | Sat 8:00am, Wed 6:30pm |
| Clarksville | Immaculate Conception | Dr. Ron Oakland | 931-358-9471 | Sat 9:00am |
| Dickson | St. Christopher | Corena Harris LSCW | 615-446-2134 | Mon 4:15pm |
| Fayetteville | First Presbyterian | Farris Raulston | 931-433-0652 | Tue 7:00pm |
| Franklin | St. Matthew's Catholic Church | Lauren Cole, RSM | 615-646-0378 | Mon 8:30am |
| Franklin | St. Paul | Lyle McLevain | 615-582-5379 | Wed 5:30pm |
| Murfreesboro | St. Rose | Kay Curtis | 615-848-3081 | Mon 7:30pm |
| Murfreesboro | St. Rose | Patricia Darrell | 615-896-2742 | Mon 7:30pm |
| Sewanee | Otey Parish | Jennifer Michael | 931-598-5094 | Mon 7:00pm |
| Sewanee | Otey Parish | Beth Chamberlain | 931-598-5428 | Fri 12:00 noon |
| Sewanee | St. Augustine | Rev. Tom Ward | 931-598-1274 | Thur 2:30pm |
| Chattanooga | St. Peter's | Lynne Lockie | 423-842-3663 | Tue 5:30 - 7:00pm |
| Chattanooga | Grace Church | Kathy Russell | 423-517-0645 | Thur 5:00pm |
| Chattanooga | First Christian Church | Rev. Lanny C. Lawler | 423-267-4506 | Tue 4:00pm |
| Knoxville | St. James | Rev. Lou Tucker Parsons | 865-523-5687 | Mon 5:30pm |
| Knoxville | John XXIII Student Center | Beverly Froning | 865-426-4411 | Mon 7:00pm |
| Knoxville | Lakeview Center | Barbara Haning | 865-671-0766 | Thur 6:30pm |
| Knoxville | St. Andrew's Episcopal Church | The Rev. Bradford Smith | 865-983-3512 | Wed. 3:30 - 5:00pm |
| Clinton | St. Therese Catholic Church | Sandy Berger | 865-457-3170 | Thur 7:00pm |
| Lookout Mt. | Our Lady of the Mount | Brit Oehmig | 423-756-4118 | Tue 8:00am, before Mass |
| Lookout Mt. | Good Shepherd | Rev. John Talbird | 423-821-1583 | Sun 9am & Wed 4:30pm |

Saturday "Mornings of Silence"

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|--------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|--------------|------------|
| Antioch | 1st Saturday at St. Mark's | Gretchen Miller | 615-794-6720 | Sat 9:00am |
| Chattanooga | 2nd Saturday at St. Paul's | Rev. Margaret Marshall | 423-757-9580 | Sat 9:00am |

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work with concerns related to the community.

Through her work in centering prayer, Laura sensed a deep call to work with persons in need, and in January 2001 she was hired as the Director of the Community Action Committee. In the past three years, the outreach of CAC has multiplied tenfold with increased aid to persons in need, a grant program named the Lifetime Improvement Fund designed to assist families making systemic changes in their conditions, and the designation of Otey Parish as a distribution center for Second Harvest, a nationwide program providing food for persons in need. As one of the leading advocates in the community for the concerns of the poor, Laura traces the

heart and soul of her work to her participation in the Eucharist and the discipline of centering prayer. She herself is challenged to describe how these matters are related. As Laura states, "What I am now trying to discern is how my practice feeds my ministry and how my ministry feeds my practice. I ponder often how they are bound and linked together." In a sense, this is a challenge for many who practice centering prayer: how are prayer and action related? The question will never be answered with complete clarity, yet at a deep level, many know they are pursuing a line of inquiry of profound importance. ⊕