

Centering Prayer Week 7

*“Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any ‘torturous crooked road’* in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.”*
Psalm 139: 23-24 (*Orthodox Jewish Bible)

Letting Go and Letting Be (Chapter 14 Audiobook)

“When you hold lightly it is easier to let go.” Christine Lidvall

Letting go is at the heart of Centering Prayer. As you let go, you open into God, unfold toward others, expand into life. Letting go frees you from the tight grip of self, from the trap of obsessive mind, from the contraction of self-will. One of the first things you learn in Centering Prayer is that you cannot think yourself into letting go. Hanging on to the idea of letting go is not letting go. Letting go means not paying attention to the content of your thoughts and instead ever so gently returning to God. Centering Prayer gives you a sacred symbol for this returning; a gentle letting go with each return.

As you sit down in Centering Prayer, you immediately become more aware of the thoughts that are in your mind. You also become more aware of the things in your life to which you are attached – favorite possessions, the people you love, your own sense of self – the things in life that fill your thoughts and stimulate your emotions. In faith you realize that the things of life are mere expressions of God in the world. You are attached to thoughts to the extent that you are attached to things in life. Hence learning to let go of thoughts in Centering Prayer teaches you how to let go of attachment to the things in life by consenting to God.

Boats on a River

“Thomas Keating describes this process using the metaphor of boats on a river. The river represents your consciousness which is like a constantly moving stream. Down the river float all kinds of boats in the form of your thoughts. Some thoughts may be innocent little ‘kayaks,’ like a sudden wondering whether you left the keys in the car or if tomorrow is the day to put out the trash. Other thoughts may be huge battleships of raw emotion and contentiousness, like reliving the fight you had with your boss last week. Or they may be half-sunken waterlogged hulls barely above the surface: old hurts and memories from the past. On and on down the river they float.

Now imagine yourself as a scuba diver seated on a rock at the bottom of the riverbed. From your watery perch you can look up and see the boat hulls passing overhead. Notice that you do not have to do anything to prevent their coming and going. If you happen to get

interested in a particular boat, swim up to the surface, and climb on board (find yourself engaged in a thought), return *ever so gently* to your sacred word.” (The Heart of Centering Prayer, Cynthia Bourgeault, 2016)

“He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul.” Psalm 23:3

Monkey Mind

Actually, thoughts are not an obstacle to contemplation – only thoughts to which you are nailed, the thoughts that linger in your mind and hold you to them. In certain areas of Africa, tribesmen hunt monkeys with a very simple yet effective trap. The hunters cut a small hole in the shell of a coconut, scoop out the insides, insert a sweet meat into the hole, and leave the coconut on the floor of the jungle. A monkey smells the delicate sweetmeat, finds the coconut, and puts its hand in the hole to retrieve the bait. But once it has grasped the bait, the monkey’s clenched fist is too large to be pulled out through the hole. The coconut is too heavy for the monkey to carry very far. If the monkey would just let go of the bait, it could get its hand out and climb to freedom. The trap is perfect because the monkey will not let go. It is a captive perfect ingredient for monkey soup.

Like the monkey, you get trapped when you grasp your thoughts. Something in you believes that your survival is bound to these thoughts. You don’t know how to let thoughts go. You cannot let go, directly, on your own. Trying to let go of thoughts just binds you more tightly to them. You need the indirection of an intermediary. In Centering Prayer, you have a sacred symbol that expresses your consent to God. Often, you see how full your hands are by how full your mind is – full of thoughts that hold you. When engaged with thoughts, returning *ever so gently* to your sacred word, a symbol of consent to the presence and action of God within, frees you from this bondage. As you are freed, in God, of attachment to thoughts, you have a freer relationship with everything in life. You become freer to love the things of life in God and let them go in God. This kind of freedom lets love flow more easily to others through you.

“But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” Isaiah 40:31

This 10 week series is based on David Frenette’s book and audio workshop on Centering Prayer.

- The Path to Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God, David Frenette, 2017.
- Centering Prayer Meditations: Effortless Contemplation to Deepen Your Experience of God, David Frenette (2014, Audiobook)