

Centering prayer and Ignatian prayer

Centering prayer has occasionally popped up on the edge of my consciousness, but I never took any real interest in it. Yes, many of those who approved of it are people of substance in the world of spirituality,¹ but I had my hands full applying the Ignatian method, my birthright as a Jesuit, to my own refractory inner life, and by the grace of God I found great satisfaction in seeing how well this method suited most of my directees.

A month of rest and renewal after a change of assignment was made possible in January 2017. The recommendation of friends led me to the Desert House of Prayer near Tucson AZ. The desert provided a totally different environment for me to recoup my energies and find a life-giving spiritual routine.

Silence is a very serious business in this house of prayer, and at the heart of its programmes is centering prayer. My first reaction was a reluctant one; “What am I getting into? This was not part of my plan.” But then I said to myself: “I am here and this is an unexpected God-given opportunity to learn something new. You have nothing to lose. Enter into it and see where it goes.”

BASICS:

This I have tried to do. Reading has led me to recognize the roots of this form of prayer in the Eastern traditions of spirituality, and derivatively in Western ones, and reflection on my life long experiences to recognize my natural antipathy to it. In classical terms, I am a child of the West and my approach to God kataphatic, full of words, ideas, images, whereas this form of prayer is designed to shut all this down and to plunge me into an apophatic silence and emptiness. The daily schedule of this retreat house is simple, based on a monastic model, but it includes periods of centering prayer. The afternoon session comprises two twenty minute sittings interrupted by a slow walk. To minimize distractions, chairs are turned around such that they face outward rather than the centre of the room.

There are variants in the literature on how one should do centering prayer, but

¹ Names emerge in my mind such as Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington, John Main – all in the Benedictine tradition of religious life, and Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopalian priest with a real affinity to the Benedictine tradition.

they all involve a process of quieting the psyche, its thoughts, feelings, scenarios, and images, and entering into a space of emptiness where God can allow Himself to be found. One observes whatever enters into one's mind, at times a miscellaneous jumble of impressions, at other times a persistent focus, with strong feelings, difficult to dispel, triggered by a concern for the future or an incident of the past. A term which spoke to me from the literature is 'monkey mind'. Inner silence is the void one often abhors, and one is like a monkey jumping from branch to branch, often without any rhyme or reason, seeking to keep the inner patter going. In the course of observing these goings on one discovers repetitive patterns of inordinate anxiety, concern, attachment. The wheel keeps turning but goes nowhere. To more clearly discover and articulate this futility opens a path to spiritual progress and renewal.

But the point is not to keep observing and analyzing this psychic activity but to let go of it, that it might slip into oblivion, at least for a time. Thus from being a pool churned up by various waves one hopes to become a still reflective pool of emptiness, remaining in that state as long as possible, at least until the next bout of psychic activity sneaks in and needs to be turned off. One might be graced with relative calm during the twenty minutes, but more often than not one has to let go over and over again of irruptive activity in order to enter into the emptiness at the centre where God resides. How does one go about stilling a consciousness with teeming thoughts and images and feelings? There are different approaches. One can use a word which serves as a focus in one's resolve to quiet oneself. Or in other related prayer traditions one will focus on one's breathing. We will comment on these two approaches a bit later.

CONTROVERSIES:

At this point, however, we will note that these approaches to prayer are used by Christians and non-Christians. Even a cursory exploration of centering prayer on internet sites and blogs shows strong views both for and against it among Catholics. For orthodoxy watchdogs it is a dangerous attempt to ape transcendental meditation, and leads to a blurred sense of God's distinct identity. For others – I mentioned some names above – it flows from the authentic Christian tradition and is uniquely suited to our age. Christian authors who advocate it often speak experientially, leaving doctrinal concerns aside, of their peak experience or those of their directees and in that experience it may be difficult to disentangle human and Divine Self. Psychologically, union with God

can be experienced as absorption in God in which the one engaged in contemplation might at times disappear as a distinct identity. But then there are enough strong clues in their writings to indicate that they have no intent to overturn the Christian doctrine on God as the distinct creator of all that is.²

For Christians a foundational quotation of Augustine offers a sure guide. “You have created our hearts restless until they rest in Thee.” In other words at the core of our being, at the root of our authentic self, is a mystery, an emptiness which only God who has created us can fill. Our vain quest to fill it with what is not God only accentuates the restlessness. To enter into the emptiness may feel like entry into the void, but that void is where God chooses to reveal Himself, in darkness or in light, in a love which can be searing or consoling or, usually best for us, imperceptible.

Another way of highlighting what characterizes Christian centering prayer is that each one of us is created as a unique person, a mystery which uniquely mirrors the mystery of God. Our union with God does not annihilate our distinct self or absorb it into an impersonal All. Rather God treasures each one of us and His union with us respects and enhances our unique distinctness. Union does not mean absorption.

At the same time our uniqueness does not mean separateness. We are distinct but not separate. In other words our uniqueness is not self-enclosed but relational through and through. The classical term that applies to the persons of the Trinity applies to each one of us: I too am a subsistent relation: Subsistent: I am uniquely myself and no other; relation: I am totally turned toward God as Mystery of Fulness who in his own time and way will fill my emptiness, secondly toward other created persons, and then toward creation in all of its facets.

There is a genuine process in which our false selves, the ones we construct for

² Often what we find at work here is a rhetorical strategy of saying something shocking so as to draw attention. A classical instance of this is Meister Eckhart, the 13-14th century Dominican mystic. A helpful perspective on his is found in “Meister Eckhart’s Construal of Mysticism”, in *The Way* 56 (2017), 1-13. One might make the same critique of passages in recent writings of Richard Rohr, but his Franciscan roots are very strong. In his *Eager to Love* he extols *haecceitas* or thisness, a quality of every created being which establishes its uniqueness and demonstrates how God treasures it in its distinct identity.

ourselves in a quest for self-aggrandizement and self-protection, are dismantled and we dive into a much vaster ocean bereft of our constructed identities. In that ocean, however, we find our authentic deep self, treasured and enhanced rather than diminished and absorbed as God comes close to us.

TECHNIQUES AND APPROACHES:

And now to the techniques of centering prayer. The first one entails choosing a simple word which is gently and inwardly repeated to dispel attachment to the image, thought, feeling, concern which seeks to take control, and in this way to return to the emptiness we seek. Each person is instructed to find his or her own word. I tried a variety of words which did not work for me. Eventually I came to the insight that I needed a word that countered my own propensity to constantly think through everything, foresee the future and its pitfalls, pass judgement on what goes on around me. Of course, most of our time as humans is taken up with thinking, judging, explaining, remembering, anticipating, planning. But why do we always have to be doing this, as if each of us was carrying the weight of the universe on his or her shoulders? A proper and realistic rhythm urges us for a time each day to relax our grip, realizing that it is more essential for God to know what we know than for us to know it; that His knowledge is sure whereas ours is often faulty; that His is permeated with a love beyond all telling whereas ours is often suffused with anxiety; that He sees the full context whereas we are afflicted with tunnel vision; thus we can in total confidence let go of whatever goes on in our limited awarenesses. We can often fall into the illusion that we have to figure everything out perfectly. Centering prayer is a time for us to be realistic about our limited selves, to make time for emptiness and radical trust.

Have I finally found a magic word to still my multifarious psyche? No. But in the process I have discovered continuity between centering prayer and the Ignatian prayer I am used to. The word I have recently been struggling with is “take and receive”, familiar to Jesuits and Ignatians. Normally the “take and receive” prayer is seen as applying to our various powers - memory, understanding, will. I profess my readiness to allow these powers to be vehicles of God’s action. I am even ready to lose their use, gradual or sudden, returning them to the Lord who bestowed them on me. (For many in their sunset years this loss begins with memory, and it continues with the gradual diminishment of their acute understanding and purposeful will.)

What centering prayer invites me to do, however, is to forego the normal activity of these powers. I may be fully able to remember, reflect, nurse my feelings, use my imagination, make decisions, but I attempt to shut down these activities and allow myself to be simply present to the inner emptiness where my authentic self resides, a self far different from the noisy false egos I constantly build up to foster the illusion that I understand and control myself. That authentic self, both subsistent and relational, I can never grasp and control; in my prayer I make myself ready for whatever way God wants to grace it, love it, enliven it. Mostly God will do so silently and without my awareness, and this is good, but at times I may receive significant touches of His presence, which in Jesuit parlance would be termed “consolations”, and this is also good.

This action of God is precisely the desired outcome of the “take and receive” prayer: I turn everything over to God and tell Him that all I need is “your love and your grace”. Thus in its own way centering prayer is a way of entering into dynamism of the contemplation for obtaining love. My repeated acts of letting go of my psychic activity in centering prayer have as purpose the creation of a deep receptivity to whatever love and grace God wants to bestow on me. This way I am convinced that my foray into centering prayer was not a deviation from my Ignatian path but a deepening of it.³

I soon found myself exploring a second approach, also found in the literature,

³ Another similarity of centering and Ignatian prayer confirms this. Many teachers of centering prayer come out of the Benedictine tradition. In that tradition *contemplatio*, of which centering prayer is a subset, is founded in *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio*. Ignatius suggests a similar foundation, beginning with meditation, moving into what he terms contemplation, a highly kataphatic activity which engages the senses and the imagination, an activity which is distinct from contemplation in the classical sense, and both meditation and Ignatian contemplation end with colloquy (akin to Benedictine *oratio*). He also suggests a form of *lectio* and of rhythmic prayer. But these are essentially means to be used inasmuch as they are helpful, and they are no longer needed whenever God chooses to deal directly with the exercitant and to bestow His lights and consolations. Wherever one finds the presence of God in prayer, one stays there and sets aside whatever agenda one may have had for the rest of the prayer. At that point contemplation in the classical sense takes over. Thus the desired outcomes of centering and Ignatian prayer are essentially the same. What might the difference be? In centering prayer *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio* are telescoped in order to arrive quickly at *contemplatio*. This is not normally the practice in Ignatian prayer. The preparatory stages are dealt with in a leisurely and systematic way.

which I found very helpful. It entails awareness of one's breathing, breathing in and breathing out. That bodily rhythm can be interpreted in different ways. What I found myself doing is to visualize my breathing in as the drawing in of God's love and grace, filling the emptiness at the heart of my human spirit, and normally doing so in quiet and imperceptible ways. And in this context breathing out is seen as the passing of this breath of God (Holy Spirit) into my psyche, dispelling false and spurious thoughts and images, deconstructing the false selves which we are prone to build up, and empowering us to do works of justice and compassion under the guidance of the Spirit. The dynamic of the 'take and receive' prayer is present in this way of visualizing my breathing.

This is only half the story. The normal sequence in centering prayer is to begin by emptying ourselves of all thought and image, turning over our memory, understanding, and will to God; and then God will bestow upon us sufficient love and grace. We dispose ourselves: God does the rest. In a non Christian context this can be taken as an attempt to tap into and unleash the power of the impersonal divine forces, whatever they are. The word becomes a magic talisman and the initiative in our prayer is totally ours. But breathing in and breathing out are both essential. We are dealing with a two-way street. Even more fundamentally the process begins not with 'take and receive' but with 'your love and your grace which are sufficient for me'. In the end it is that love and grace that empower my total disposal of my own self and its powers to the action and purpose of God, my effective achievement of a measure of inner emptiness. I must always remember that any disposition, preparation, desire on my part is already the fruit God's grace. I am not dealing with an impersonal force that I draw to myself through expert technique but with a personal relationship, made up of faith and abandonment on my part and mercy and compassion on God's. Yes, I cannot breathe in unless I have emptied my lungs; but I have nothing to exhale apart from having first inhaled. Getting rid of my fear, self-congratulation, anxiety, defensiveness, resentment is not a condition for God to grant me his love; they are the impact of his love which heals me to be my authentic and full self.

My foray into centering prayer did not lead me astray into a variety of heresies, as some guardians of orthodoxy might fear, but brought me back to the classical tradition on God and on grace. It is my foray: each person can experiment and find what works best for him or her.