

Chapter 1. Center and Circumference

Leader: The Apostle John writes: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” Let us silently confess our sin to God.

Leader: God of grace, you have given us Jesus, the light of the world. But we hide in the shadow of our sins.

People: Forgive us. We have failed to follow your way and love your truth. Shine on us, fill our lives with your radiance. Teach us to walk in the light of your grace. Amen.

*Almighty God, we long to see you.
Open our hearts and make them pure.
Spirit we wash our hands in mercy;
Come teach our souls to love your truth.*

Leader: The Apostle declares: “If we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” God’s grace, like a bright star, calls us to Jesus. In him, our sin is forgiven! Let us walk in the light of Christ.

People: Thanks be to God!

Lectio

Late it was that I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new, late I loved you! And look, you were within me, and I was outside, and there I sought for you and in my ugliness I plunged into the beauties that you have made. You were with me, and I was not with you. Those outer beauties kept me far from you, yet if they had not been in you, they would not have existed at all. You called, you cried out, you shattered my deafness: you flashed, you shone, you scattered my blindness: you breathed perfume, and I drew in my breath and I pant for you: I tasted, and I am hungry and thirsty: you touched me, and I burned for your peace. (Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.27)

Questions on Chapter 1

1. What does Rohr mean by living on the circumference or at the center? What is a centered person? (1-4)
2. How is this “journey to the center” accomplished? (5-8)
3. What does Rohr mean by “everything belongs”? (9-11)
4. Why does Rohr say that self-knowledge and knowledge of God grow together? (12-16)
5. What is the “third way that emerges only when you hold the tension of opposites”? (17-19)
6. What exercise would you suggest to help us find our true centers?

Getting to know yourself

The traditional theology of the Greek Fathers devised three terms for three aspects of [a person’s] one spirit.

- That which is unconscious and below reason was the *anima* or *psyche*, the “animal” soul, the realm of instinct and emotion, the real of automatism in which [one] functions as a psychophysical organism
- The reason, the enlightened, conscious, active principle, the *animus* or *nous* [mind]
- There is an even higher principle ... in which both the others are joined and transcend themselves in union with God, [which] is the *spiritus*, or *pneuma*. This higher principle is ... [a person] united, vivified, and raised above [nature] and inspired by God

The “spiritual life” is then the perfectly balanced life in which the body with its passions and instincts, the mind with its reasoning and its obedience to principle, and the spirit with its passive illumination by the Light and Love of God form one complete [person] who is in God and with God and from God and for God. One [person] in whom God is all in all. One [person] in whom God carries out his own will without obstacle. (Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*)

Exercise: self-knowledge

When you find yourself uncentered or anxious or not at peace, notice *why*. What do you fear? What do you desire? What are you seeking? What is it that is driving you? Pray for self-knowledge, then think honestly and fearlessly about what it is that you fear or desire. Can you believe Rohr’s claim that *everything belongs*?

1. We are a circumference people, with little access to the center...our "skin" is not bad, it's just not our soul or spirit. We can remain on the circumferences of our lives for quite a long time. (13-14)
2. Yet the great teachers tell us not to stay on the circumference too long or we will never know ourselves or God. The two knowings, in fact, seem to move forward together. This movement might also be known as conversion, transformation, or growth in holiness. You cannot make this journey in your head, alone. Actually, you cannot make it alone at all. You must be led. (15-16)
3. Our skin-encapsulated egos are the only self that most of us know, and this is where we usually get trapped....Most of us have to be taught how to see; true seeing is the heart of spirituality today. (17)
4. Our journeys around and through our realities, or "circumferences," lead us to *the core reality*, where we meet both our truest selves and our truest God. We do not really know what it means to be human unless we know God. And in turn we do not really know God except through our own broken and rejoicing humanity. (19)
5. The path of prayer and the path of suffering seem to be the two Great Paths of transformation. Suffering seems to get our attention; love and prayer seem to get our heart and our passion. (14-15)
6. The ordinary path is a gradual awakening and an occasional quieting, a passion for and a surrendering to, a caring and a not caring at all. It is both center and circumferences, and I am finally not in control of either one. . . This reality, felt and not denied, our reality, my limited and misinterpreted experience, still becomes the revelatory place for God. (15)
7. You do not resolve the God question in your head, or even in the perfection of your moral response. It is resolved *in you*, when you agree to *bear the mystery of God*: God's suffering for the world and God's ecstasy in the world. (17)
8. Why should we need to awaken our deepest and most profound selves? And how to do we do it? By praying and meditating? By silence, solitude, and sacraments? Yes to all of the above, but the most important way is to *live and fully accept our reality*.... our own inglorious, mundane, and ever-present cross. For some reason, it is easier to attend church services than simply to reverence the real—"the practice of the presence of God," as some have called it. . . . Thus most run toward more esoteric and dramatic postures instead of *bearing the mystery of God's suffering and joy inside themselves*. (17-18)
9. In God's reign "everything belongs," even the broken and poor parts. Until we have admitted this in our own soul, we will usually perpetuate expelling systems in the outer world of politics and class. Dualistic thinking begins in the soul and moves to the mind and eventually moves to the streets. True prayer, however, nips the lie in the bud. It is usually experienced as tears, surrender, or forgiveness. (16)
10. Quoting Julian of Norwich, Rohr says, "First there is the fall, and then there is the recovery from the fall. But *both* are the mercy of God." (20)
11. The great and merciful surprise is not that we come to God by doing it right but by doing it wrong! (21)
12. On a very practical level, the problem is that contemporary westerners have a very fragile sense of their identity, much less an identity that can rest in union and relationship with God. Objectively, of course, we are already in union with God, but it is very hard for people to believe and experience this when they have no strong sense of identity, no boundaries, and no authentic religious experience. (21)
13. Being over and against is a lot easier than being in love. (22)
14. It is much easier to belong to a group than it is to know that you belong to God. (22)
15. If your prayer is not enticing you outside your comfort zones, if your Christ is not an occasional "threat," you probably need to do some growing up and learning to love. (22-23)
16. Too often, young adults full of Yeats's "passionate intensity" about doctrine and dogma and which group is going to heaven use God to shore up their nonselves. Such traditionalism is actually avoiding the Tradition of transformation through death and rebirth. (23)
17. Traveling the road of healthy religion and true contemplation will lead to calmly held boundaries, which need neither to be defended constantly nor abdicated in the name of "friendship". The road is a "narrow road that few travel upon" these days (Matt. 7:14). It is what many of us like to call "The Third Way": the *tertium quid* that emerges only when you hold the tension of opposites.
18. True contemplatives are paradoxically risk-takers and reformists, precisely because they have no private agendas, jobs or securities to maintain. Their security and identity are founded in God, not in being right, being paid by a church, or looking for promotion in people's eyes. These people alone can move beyond self-interest and fear to do God's necessary work. Look at how many saints, theologians, and especially woman foundresses of orders were corrected, threatened, and even persecuted by the church during their lifetimes. (24)
19. I believe we have no real access to *who we really are* except in God. Only when we rest in God can we find the safety, the spaciousness, and the scary freedom to be *who we are*, *all that we are*, *more than we are*, and *less than we are*. Only when we live and see through God can "everything belong."