

BCP 2: The Way of *Life*

Many people who try centering prayer come away saying “wow, I’m really horrible at this!” It seems to me that any prayer exercise that make people say that could be framed better—especially since prayer is the work of the Holy Spirit, not our own effort to “get it right.” The way centering prayer is taught frequently makes people think that they have a job to do, something to accomplish—and then they discover that they’re not able to do it. Or, to put it another way, centering prayer seems to make people think they must strive to be not striving—and then wonder why it is so difficult.

Keating gives this instruction: “When you become aware of thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.” First, this can give the impression that the goal is a state in which there are no thoughts, but that’s not correct—Keating would have us turn our attention and consent to God. Second, the only actor mentioned in this instruction is *you*—when *you* become aware of thoughts, *you* have to do something to remedy that situation. Where is the Holy Spirit, who teaches us to pray, who prays in us? This instruction can seem like a psychological technique to slow down the racing mind rather than an awareness of God’s presence and an openness to the work of the Spirit.

Even more, Keating includes *desires* in the word “thoughts.” As a result, this instruction can give the impression that the goal of centering prayer is to have a mind free of desires. But a heart free of desires would be a person who cares about nothing—a stoic. An AI chatbot. On the contrary, we are to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. Where is the Spirit of Love, who fills us? This instruction can make prayer seem like a technique to eliminate desires rather than a union with God in love. I don’t think that Keating is misguided or wrong—rather, that his instructions can easily be misunderstood.

The road to contemplative prayer is *loving attention to God*. When we notice that our attention is on something that is not God, we turn toward God. When we notice that we are anxious about something, we remember God and entrust that thing to him. Or, better, we allow God to turn our attention and our desires—we seek him and let him work in us.

The exercise taught in *The Cloud of Unknowing* is described more explicitly in terms of desire for God, of a yearning, a “reaching out toward God” in love. This aspiration is at the heart of contemplative prayer. It is *ardent, passionate*. It is this love that transforms us, that purifies us, that teaches us. This love is the Holy Spirit in us.

The exercise of *The Cloud* assumes that we have pondered God and his works for a long time. When the love that results is strong enough to stand on its own, we may eventually no longer need to read and ponder God’s ways and works first before loving him. In fact, thoughts about desires, fears, or concerns, for ourselves and for others, are actually a step removed from attention directly to God; we let them all go and rest in love of God. We seek God’s will. And it is in this death to our own self-centered desires and fears that we find our new life in Christ.

Exercise for Week 2: Surrender

Here is a reframing of a centering prayer-like exercise intended to alleviate some common misunderstandings, add *The Cloud's* emphasis on the role of aspiration, and introduce a rejection of all that holds you back:

God is present, loving you, desiring your company. Give God your attention. Reach out to him in love. Your part is to show up and to place yourself in a posture to receive silence. Then be grateful for whatever comes, whether devotion or dryness or distraction. When your own desires or failings, or the needs or actions of other people, or the things you want to accomplish, come to mind, give them to God and let him worry about them. You turn to the One who loves you and enjoy God's presence.

This week's exercise will be similar to that of last week—it will involve daily *lectio divina*, a centering prayer-like exercise, and reflection. This week we will also make a point of surrendering any attachments we notice.

1. Pray for God's presence. Pray for more love
2. Take a few minutes to read the reading for the day and reflect on it
3. Practice the modified centering prayer exercise for 20-30 minutes
4. Take the remaining time to reflect on your prayer time through journaling

When you notice that you are distracted,

1. Note briefly what desire or fear or concern is pulling your attention away from God
2. Without analyzing or dwelling on it, simply acknowledge its presence
3. Then offer it to God. Let him worry about it; you think about him
4. Return to your simple intention toward God

This is not about forcing yourself to let go or judging yourself for having attachments. It's about discovering the freedom that comes with surrender. Everything that isn't God—whether disturbing or delightful—can be given to God. Each "I give this to God" is a small step toward greater openness to God's presence.

Journaling and Journee

Reflect on your centering prayer time. How did it go? What kinds of thoughts distracted you? What kinds of attachments led to these distractions? Were you able to let go of these attachments and give them to God? You can reflect on these questions by writing about them in a paper journal, or you can use the online interactive journal, *Journee*, at

life.ccel.org/agents/bcp-2-surrender

