Beyond Centering Prayer

A Journey into Life, Light, and Love

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Introduction

Be still and know that I am God. (Ps. 46:10)

I still remember the Sunday School class I attended at my church nearly fifty years ago. It was intended as a preparation for public profession of faith, so it made sense that the class consisted in studying the catechism. We should know what it is that we are professing. But my reaction was, "I don't want to know *about* God—I want to *know God.*"

I think it is this desire that Augustine referred to when he said that "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." We find rest not in the conceptual knowledge of the catechism but in God himself. And life itself is the road by which that desire—that longing for God—is finally satisfied. A road laid out by God, on which he has been with us every step of the way, even if invisibly. A road by which we are healed and transformed and raised to new heights.

But that's the view that we see looking back. Walking along the road, we don't have that broader perspective. We see the bumps and potholes. We glimpse apparent dangers on either side. We can't see around the upcoming twists and turns. But if we stay on the road, eventually we arrive at that mountaintop where God is present, where we can rest in him, where we see God and all things, where we *know God.*

There are stages to this journey, milestones to be reached and passed along the way. Each leg of the journey has its own challenges, which must be surpassed to reach the next milestone. As we start out on this journey we may see interesting things in the woods beside the road. We spend time exploring. We find a cave that keeps us somewhat dry, a bed of moss that is relatively soft and comfortable—more comfortable than the arduous journey, at any rate. But we aren't making progress. Finally, we decide that there is no other way to make progress but to continue down the road. And we reach the milestone called "life," for it is in giving up our lives that we find true life.

And yet progress is intermittent. We move forward, but sometimes we decide to go back and walk again over a prior part of the road with a view that we had enjoyed. We go back to look for some more of that wild fruit we had tasted. We slow down because the mountain ahead looks daunting. The fog makes the way seem treacherous. But eventually we come to perceive that these are delaying tactics, that the one who built the road knew what he was doing, that moving forward is the only way forward, that there is beauty and joy in all parts of the journey. And we reach the milestone called "light."

As we gain elevation and get closer to our destination, we start to sense it. Desire to arrive at the top grows, and it hastens us along. We realize that the attractive distractions along the side of the road are slowing us down, so we don't turn aside—don't give them our attention. Drawn by desire, we pick up the pace. Barely noticing, we pass the milestone called "love." Here the distractions and desires grow silent, and we begin to *know God.* We can almost *taste* the mountaintop joy.

Divided heart, scattered mind

God wants to be known. God wants to share himself with us. This is made abundantly clear throughout the Bible. The new covenant promise as articulated by Jeremiah is this: "They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."[1] Paul implies that knowledge of God's will is adoption: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."[2] Jesus describes this knowledge as salvation: "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God."[3] He says that this knowledge of God comes through love: "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, . . . and I will love them and reveal myself to them."[4]

So what's wrong with me? Why don't I know God as deeply and intimately as I would like? Why am I not always aware of where the Spirit is leading? What is it that blocks this knowledge of God? And why am I not always filled with the joy that is supposed to be the result: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete"?[5] Surely the problem is not on God's end; what is it in my that blocks this knowledge of God?

Jesus's words to his disciples give the key: it is to those who love him with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength that he reveals himself. This knowledge of God has love as its medium. Other loves block the way. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."[6]

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[1] Jeremiah 31:34
[2] Romans 7:14
[3] John 17:3
[4] John 14:21
[5] John 15:11
[6] Matthew 5:8

Centering Prayer

God has planned the journey and placed us on the road. There is no way forward except to go forward. But is there anything that we can do to arrive at the destination more quickly? Many exercises have been proposed to strengthen us for the journey. The one I want to explore more deeply here is Centering Prayer. Perhaps you have heard of it or tried it. Perhaps you have a current practice, but you wonder how it fits into the Christian life, or where it leads. In this book we'll explore Centering Prayer—and what's beyond.

Centering Prayer and I have a history. My first foray into Centering Prayer was decades ago. A retired pastor led an introductory group on the practice at my church. He talked about selecting a sacred word and using it as a symbol of my consent to God's presence and action within. He talked about returning to the sacred word whenever I noticed thoughts. He talked about gently letting go of thoughts, which then floated away like little paper boats on a stream. He described the process of having thoughts, and then releasing them, as a kind of divine therapy purging the subconscious, working through issues I had not sufficiently dealt with. There were charts and diagrams.

And then we would practice. At first, I would sit there, not sure exactly what I was supposed to be doing, what state of mind I was trying to achieve, except that when I noticed thoughts, I was supposed to release them and let them float away. Apparently I was seeking a mental state free of thoughts—but of course, thoughts still came. I was never free of them. I was also very aware of noises or itches, of the other people in the room. In any case, I seemed to be bad at it.

I practiced with this group for a couple of years, but I never seemed able to achieve that thoughtless silence that I (mistakenly) perceived as the goal for more than few moments, and my attempts at it felt extremely dry. However, the practice was still valuable for me—I learned the important skill of watching what is going on in my mind and turning my train of thought when it went in a direction I didn't like. (That's actually not easy to do. Imagine someone saying, "don't think about flying pink elephants," and then actually not thinking about flying pink elephants. Flying pink elephants.)

As life went on, I continued to practice Centering Prayer, and I also read and meditated on many classic Christian books. I noticed that two of the most important teachers of contemplative prayer, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, both say the same thing, in different words: that there is a time in the Christian life for reading and pondering and a time for silence, that at some point God may call you from the first to the second; that active pondering may eventually become difficult or repugnant—and that that is a key indicator of the time to be still in God's presence. They agree that if you *can* ponder, you *should.* So I gave up Centering Prayer and

spent time in meditative reading of good books while it seemed fruitful, which it did for many years. And indeed, eventually it became repugnant—practically impossible for me—for about seven dark years, in which I felt unable to pray as I had in the past.

Eventually, dawn broke. Meditative reading became fruitful and joyful again—the best part of the day. God seemed close by. Wisdom and love blossomed. I found a spiritual director. One day, decades after my original attempts at Centering Prayer, my spiritual director suggested that I return to the practice for at least five minutes a day. Looking back, my past practice of Centering Prayer seemed to have been a striving to be not striving, thinking about not thinking, desiring to be free of desires. These considerations led me to a deeper understanding: that silence is a gift of God, not something that I can achieve by myself; that it is the Spirit who teaches me to pray and prays in me, in whatever mode he chooses; and that I should keep God's role and presence in prayer in mind.

These intuitions led me to a modified guideline for Centering Prayer:

> Place yourself in a posture to receive silence, and be grateful for whatever comes.

This seemed a much more passive approach. I still had work to do, to "place myself in a posture," but there was no expectation of a particular result, nothing I was supposed achieve. Rather, any result was to be received gratefully, as a gift. And results varied dramatically—devotion or dryness, joy or sorrow, insight or darkness.

A couple of years after that I participated in a group reading and practicing the prayer exercise of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a classic anonymous fourteenth-century Middle English introduction to contemplative prayer. Although Centering Prayer is based on the prayer exercise of *The Cloud*, I noticed differences in emphasis and technique, even apparent fundamental differences in goal and method. And both of them were very different from contemplative prayer in the sense that Thomas Merton defines it, where God "takes possession of the soul's facilities and moves them directly according to His will."[7] I noticed once again that when I tried to practice pure Centering Prayer, the result was most often a sense of dryness and failure. The method seemed too scripted, too constricting. There was a sense of *willfulness* about it to me—that I had a particular form of prayer in mind, and I was going to strive to achieve it. But isn't contemplative prayer supposed to be God's work and not our own? Isn't it the Spirit who teaches us to pray—or prays *in* us?

The origins of Centering Prayer

The modern Centering Prayer movement began in the 1970s. Three Trappist monks, Fathers Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and Basil Pennington, saw the

[7] *What is Contemplation*, 25.

attraction that Eastern meditation had for young spiritual seekers, and they proposed Centering Prayer as a system of meditative prayer rooted in their own Christian contemplative tradition. They based it on the prayer exercise described in the *The Cloud of Unknowing* and other sources. Two of the key books introducing Centering Prayer are Keating's books, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (Continuum, 2000) and *Invitation to Love* (Continuum, 2001). These three monks formed the Contemplative Outreach organization that is still active today in promoting contemplative prayer.

Since then, Centering Prayer and the Contemplative Outreach organization have been a tremendous gift to thousands of people. They have introduced countless people to the possibility of a more direct, intimate relationship with God, unmediated by other people, or even by words and concepts and catechisms. Centering Prayer offers practical steps for beginners and has made contemplative prayer accessible outside the monastery walls.

At the same time, Centering Prayer is not the same as the prayer exercise of *The Cloud*. Centering Prayer is simplified and systematized, designed to be approachable by everyone. And while Centering Prayer and the exercise of *The Cloud* are somewhat different, they are both different from contemplative prayer. Both are exercises by which we may offer ourselves and our loving attention to God. But (infused) contemplative prayer is purely God's work, not something we can do by ourselves. Keating is aware of these differences. He calls Centering Prayer "a method of reducing obstacles to the gift of contemplative prayer and of developing habits conducive to responding to the inspirations of the Spirit" (*Invitation to Love*, p. 144). So while I will be pointing out ways in which Centering Prayer is different from the exercise of *The Cloud*, or ways in which it differs from contemplative prayer, I'm not criticizing. Exercises, such as scales for learning to play the piano, are essential for beginners, but we hope eventually to forget technique and get lost in making music. I hope in this book to explore what comes Beyond Centering Prayer.

Beyond Centering Prayer

At the time of this writing, I am leading a group at my church that I am called "Beyond Centering Prayer." It will meet for five weeks. In the first week we are practicing pure Centering Prayer. The next four weeks examine four specific ways in which the prayer exercise of *The Cloud* differs from or goes beyond Centering Prayer. These are symbolized by Life, Light, and Love, with the final one called "Without Ceasing." Each week has an exercise that is a modification of Centering Prayer designed to make it more like the exercise of *The Cloud*. There are short readings from classic sources such as *Open Mind, Open Heart* and *The Cloud* for each day, intended to be read in the style of *lectio divina*. After the day's centering-prayer-like

exercise, participants are encouraged to reflect on the prayer time through journaling.

Journee: An Interactive Journal

There are two options for the reflection part of the exercise. The first is traditional journaling by writing on paper. I will provide questions for you to reflect on. The second option is an interactive journal powered by Artificial Intelligence that I have put together for this exercise. I am calling it "Journee." It will prompt you with questions for reflection. After you type your response, it will offer suggestions, or quotes from key literature, or follow-up questions. It is designed to help guide and encourage you in the exercises. Some participants in the class at my church found the idea a little off-putting or intimidating at first, but those who tried it found it very helpful. One said she was "in love" with it. (Kiddingly, of course.)

Journee doesn't replace a spiritual director—no AI could do that. It doesn't truly get to know you, or have compassion, or true discernment—it takes whatever you say at face value. It doesn't pray with you. It doesn't love you. A conversation with Journee is a conversation in which there is only one participant. What it does do, like a paper journal, is offer you a space for reflection, by yourself, under the guidance of the Spirit.

But unlike a paper journal, Journee can repeat back to you what you have said in different words, helping you to see yourself from a different perspective. With a (human) spiritual director you might edit your words or be hesitant to say certain things, but with Journee there is no other person in the conversation to impress, no relationship that may be changed by what you say. You can immediately say whatever pops into your head without any self-editing. And as Journee reflects to you what you have said, you get a new perspective on yourself. Think of Journee as a mirror that will enable you to see yourself from a different direction. In that way, Journee can help you arrive more quickly at the self-knowledge that is an essential part of spiritual growth.

Since Journee is powered by AI, since it doesn't have true discernment, you should not treat its comments or suggestions as authoritative or reliable. Instead, use them as reflection prompts. Use them the way you would use suggestions from your friends—something to consider for yourself, not something to accept as truth from an authority.

An Invitation to Practice

Do you desire to *know God?* Do you desire greater intimacy in prayer? Do you feel drawn to Centering Prayer, or to what comes beyond? Then perhaps this book is for you. It is intended to lead you through Centering Prayer and beyond through five

weeks of exercises. It is also intended to give you background information and comparisons of Centering Prayer, the prayer exercise of *The Cloud*, and true contemplative prayer. As you read, I hope you will also practice and reflect. Just as contemplative prayer is about moving beyond knowledge of God into *knowing God*, let this book be an exercise in not just learning about but *practicing* contemplative prayer.

The exercises are divided into five weeks according to this schedule:

Week	**Exercise**
Introduction	Centering prayer
The Way of Life	Surrender
The Way of Light	Watch and pray
The Way of Love	Union with God
Without Ceasing	Bringing prayer into all of life

For each week there is an introductory handout with details of the exercise, a handout with seven short readings, and a link to a separate Journee instance designed to guide you through the exercises for that week. All of these resources can be found on the Beyond Centering Prayer web page:

`life.ccel.org/beyond-centering-prayer`

As you move through these practices, you may notice subtle but profound shifts in your relationship with God and your understanding of prayer. Many participants find that they move from trying to achieve a particular state to resting in God's presence. Others discover a newfound awareness of how their attachments and self-concerns create distance from God. Some experience a deepening capacity for sustained loving attention to God that begins to permeate everyday activities. Some experience growing peace—they accept the vagaries of life without being overcome by joy or sorrow or fear about temporary circumstances. For many, prayer becomes simpler—less wordy, less self-centered, more of a simple loving attention to God.

These exercises aren't about perfecting a technique—they're about opening ourselves more fully to the transformative work of the Spirit. The practices become less about doing and more about gratefully consenting to what God is already doing within us. Eventually, technique ends. Love remains—the love by which we *know God*, in which we are united with God. And, over the course of five weeks, or more likely many years, as we journey along the road of life, this love grows in us until we love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves.

Shall we begin?