

Back to centered

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue



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Over the years, the Episcopal church I belong to has experimented (if that is the right word) with any number of spiritual practices. We've gone through phases exploring the Enneagram, the Myers-Briggs personality inventory and various spiritual gifts inventories. But one constant has been the practice of contemplative or centering prayer.

For well over a decade, members of the Julian Meeting have gathered one Sunday evening each month to sit and center together. Two leaders of the group, who have published books on contemplative prayer, have led Sunday school classes on the subject. I have learned what I know of contemplative prayer from them, along with books and my own halting attempts at centering. These leaders assure me not to worry that my attempts are halting. There are no experts at centering prayer, they insist.

One of the attractions of contemplative prayer in our complicated age is its simplicity. No tools or accoutrements are required. You merely need silence. Turn off the TV and the radio and back away from the computer. Sit quietly in a straight-backed chair, with both feet on the floor (crossing your legs will lead to discomfort and distraction). Then "center" and simply open yourself to God. There is no real agenda. This isn't about getting something from God or about self-improvement. It

isn't about changing the world or your spouse or overcoming an enmity, at least not directly. It is about "merely" being, and being with God, for 15 or 20 minutes. (Can you stand it?)

Of course, in the silence you will be greeted immediately and tenaciously by distracting thoughts. Details of work, errands that need attending, worries about friends and family (and self) will clamor for attention. One isn't supposed to fight these thoughts—that will only make them more tenacious. One writer on centering prayer suggests keeping a notepad at hand and jotting down tasks that come to mind—then letting them go. Richard Foster suggests offering worries and distractions up to God with palms down on each leg, then turning palms up to accept God's love and reassurance.

It's essential to have a centering word or phrase that will help you return to silence. My phrase is "Let be." When my mind incessantly won't quiet, I mentally repeat the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner").

A friend of mine centers with two sentences from Teresa of Ávila. "A whole lifetime is short. I cannot depend on things that pass away," she prays. And: "God is willing to wait for me for many days and many years." Sometimes she sings these phrases to hymn tunes.

I know a spiritual director who uses a phrase to break down contemplation into stages. She begins with the entire phrase, "Be still and know that I am God." Then she shortens it a bit at a time—first to "Be still and know that I am," then to "Be still and know," then "Be still" and finally simply to "Be."

Part of the practice of contemplation is taking time and space to hear the voice of God and to sort that out from the many distractions that present themselves. Contemplative prayers often find images coming to mind and in these they see or hear God. One friend, in the process of discerning whether or not she was called to the priesthood, was engaged in centering prayer when she saw a series of musical notes building, bar by bar. In this she found assurance that God was building on what had come before in her life and leading to something more.

Another friend uses mental imagery to ease the distractions that come to mind while praying. He pictures leaves blowing in a yard. He does not try to grasp at or rake up all these leaves but briefly notes each one, then lets it go.

In my own centering, I picture my whole body like a clenched fist when I am clinging to anxieties or resentments. Letting go of these requires unclenching the fist and opening my hands, figuratively releasing my worries. Contemplative prayer is the ultimate relaxation—letting go and letting God, as they say.

This is not to say that contemplative prayer is a technique. It is the least instrumental of all spiritual practices. In centering we do not concentrate on what God can do for us. We concentrate simply on God and God's presence. God is not one of the details of our harried and overdetailed lives; God is finally and only the All. Let be.