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Community Letter

Dear Centering Prayer Community,

We send our warm greetings, praying that you and your loved ones are safe and well during these anxious times. Who would have thought that our daily lives would be so deeply changed by a tiny, highly contagious novel virus? For all its deprivations and worries, this time has also brought about a realization that we are a world-wide family, and that humans have deep wells of caring, sacrifice and compassion.

We thank God for our Centering Prayer community. This prayer of the heart reminds us daily that God is still here, present with us, offering us peace that surpasses understanding. We, in turn, take that peace out into the world to be a reassuring presence for others.

We hope you have found ways to stay connected to each other. This has rarely been so precious. Many groups are being held online (on Zoom video conferencing). They are listed on our group page at www.contemplative-phoenix.org. The Meditation

Chapel is another reliable group prayer experience. For those who don't care for video conferencing, telephone calls are still wonderful ways to reach out.

Planning is going well for our **Day of Community Connection, Mutual Sharing and Reflection. The date will be changed to early 2021.** Watch our website www.contemplative-phoenix.org for more details and registration information.

In this newsletter Denis Sheehan and Amelia Kestner share personal experiences of how Centering Prayer can change lives. Jeannie Lashinske tells about an unexpected blessing during the pandemic.

Please know you can reach out to us any time. Contact information is listed in the newsletter. We are here to respond to and enrich our prayer community. Keep praying. Stay safe. Know that you are uniquely precious to Christ, precious and beloved.

Your Chapter Service Team



An Unexpected Blessing

By Jeannie Lashinske

During pre-covid times our centering prayer group at St. Theresa's would meet weekly for two 20 minute prayer sits. It was followed by reading a book together and then, sharing on what was read. About 6 weeks into not being able to meet, one of our newer members asked if we could meet on Zoom. They offered to set it up as our time of prayer was greatly missed and needed. What blossomed from this yearning was a weekly Zoom gathering with a 30 minute prayer sit followed by a time of reflection and sharing. We start the prayer sit with the reading of a psalm segment. A reading of the same psalm segment

closes the prayer sit and is followed by a few more minutes of silence. The psalm segment is read a third time and after an additional few moments of silence people are invited to share on the psalm if desired. Sometimes the sharing is bountiful and other times we allow the silence and psalm to gently wash over us. Both are equally enriching and occur organically. Another unexpected blessing is that some people who haven't been able to physically join us even before covid have joined via Zoom. The opportunity to reconnect with beloved members from years gone by is pure gold, as well as, the steady grounding of the weekly regulars. God's steadfast faithfulness and love is surely present.



In February 2020, I attended a post-intensive retreat hosted by Contemplative Outreach of Phoenix at Santa Rita Abby in Sonoita AZ. Santa Rita is an amazing place to have a contemplative retreat, where everyone gets their own room, bath and private porch. The cloistered accommodations with limited space for retreatants allow for a deep interior silence that I have not been able to duplicate. In addition to the physical space, the volunteers who

serve these retreats are seasoned retreat leaders and know what it takes to cultivate an atmosphere where contemplation can be fostered.

This was the first post-retreat I had attended where all retreatants maintained what is referred to as “Grand Silence”. It is a time where retreatants avoid making eye contact or any other social connection wherever possible. It is surprising how much social interaction occurs by simply making eye contact. Eye contact communicates many things such as: acceptance, approval, disapproval and judgement among a variety of other responses. Post-intensive retreats provide a wonderful environment for a retreatant to go very deep inside themselves; and this is rarely comfortable, but frequently beneficial.

Sharing meals in grand silence takes some getting used to. We find that there are unspoken social norms during group meal sharing that take time to establish. It’s hard to ask someone to pass the butter when you don’t speak or make eye contact. When you accidentally look at someone and they look back, this triggers a variety of insecurities that lead to fidgeting or confusion. After a few days of fumbling around, the group seems to grow beyond this awkward stage and find a comfort.

One of the unspoken norms that occur during mealtime is retreatants begin to eat much slower. Participants tend to take a bite of something, set their utensil down, and experience the food provided. Eating a meal becomes one of many contemplative practices during the retreat; and I had a powerful revelation during one of the meals that I would like to share.

One evening we were all sitting at the dinner table having our meal and I had become quite comfortable with the practice of contemplative eating. Without the social element of conversation during meals, I began to be exceptionally present to the food on my plate. I had just taken a bite of baked oatmeal and as I looked at the portion on my plate, I could see a single oat grain. It looked like a seed that had just been picked from its stalk. I was drawn to this tiny morsel as

if it were a Hawaiian sunset. The grain of oat was in its perfect natural state, a tiny little seed, plump with a single line drawn down the middle. It was extraordinary. This single oat grain seemed to be inviting me to see reality for what it truly is: a miraculous gift, not just some substance to be shoveled into my mouth in order to relieve me of the discomfort of hunger.

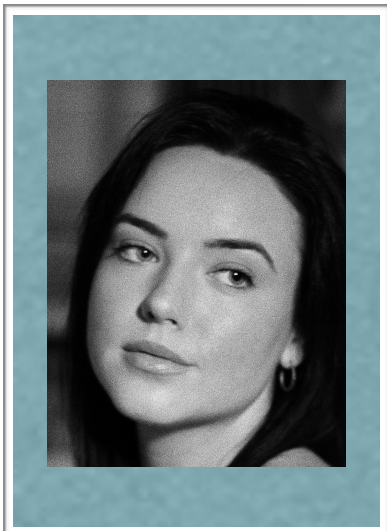
The more I was present to the food on my plate, the more I seemed to be able to see. By this time, I had actually stopped chewing, and this in itself is a miracle. I was peering into each food item as though looking through a microscope. The diversity of the leaves in the mixed green salad showed me their lifelines that run through each leaf like individual fingerprints. The tomatoes, carrots and garbanzo beans were all unique creatures whose lives were being provided so I may live. Their living energy was being transformed into my living energy. I began to be convicted of how I usually take this extraordinary gift for granted. As the meal went on, I continued to deeply contemplate all the food on my plate and ponder all that was transpiring inside of me. For 66 years I have eaten many meals in my lifetime but none of which have had the illuminating effect as this one. What an experience!

The grand finale of this whole event was the revelation that the components of the food were all gifts from God and could not possibly come from anyone else. I have learned that the farmer doesn’t really grow crops, but rather cultivates the conditions in which crops can grow. The farmer cannot grow plants without having the necessary seed to plant first. I began to consider the diversity and enormity of the plant kingdom and all that is provided and realized this was just too much for this simple creature to comprehend.

As I consented to this mystical experience, the miracle of all that is necessary for my existence began to illuminate. I could see that everything I needed to survive is provided as a gift with no condition. “No condition,” that is the convicting part. Sunlight, water, air, plants and the rejuvenation of our planet are but a few of the essential things only God can provide. This is literally everything I need to exist and God doesn’t demand anything in return. Could we really be this fortunate? We do nothing to deserve this abundance. It felt like I was a newborn infant gazed upon by a loving mother, helpless but also a priceless treasure.

For those who have not taken part in an extended silent retreat I encourage you to consider doing so. Contemplative Outreach of Phoenix hosts two eight day retreats each year and Contemplative Outreach, Ltd provides a calendar of events and retreats held outside of Arizona. God seems to make Himself known when I consent to putting all things aside in order to meet Him where He dwells. My spiritual journey has revealed that God seems to dwell in the here and now; I just need to remove the clutter in order to see.

“God, I’m Scared of You:” My Experience with Centering Prayer



By Amelia Kestner

“Why didn’t you just throw the baby out with the bath water?” I was asked this question when I shared some of my upbringing with an acquaintance a couple weeks ago. In other words, why hadn’t I simply given up on

Christianity? I was raised in a home where abuse was inflicted in God’s name, where scripture verses were patch-worked together to create a rigid and absurd framework for life; and where being a female meant becoming less of a human. I have come to discover that while I was created in the image of God, I was raised in the image of narcissistic human beings. Richard Rohr has said that “the only divisions between the sacred and the secular are in the minds of those who believe in and reinforce the split”. I was taught to confuse the character of Christ with the chaotic ideals of a violent deity. I came to realize that a division between the sacred and the sinister is surreptitiously sparse in the minds of those whose caretakers believe in and reinforce a warped view of God.

My friend’s question now begs to be answered – where do I go when the deeply engrained teachings internalized since childhood have shipwrecked me on the shores of a disillusioned faith? When the monochrome tapestry of my soul unravels to reveal millions of beautiful, vibrant, colorful threads that are still heaped in a tangled mass right in the gut of my soul? When my long-held image of God turns out to be an inflated portrait of my abuser? When the idea of God feels scary? Enter Centering Prayer.

In the last couple of years, I have clinically processed the damage of my upbringing, and more recently, the deeper layers of spiritual abuse. The only thoughts I could articulate with honesty in some of my attempted prayers of processing were “God, I’m scared of you. Please hold me close while I keep you at arm’s length.” My desire to pray was hampered by anxiety over learning a whole new identity of God, and most importantly, over whether God was safe. My lips were sealed for quite some time. I felt exiled from myself and even from my safe place within. Then I happened

upon a seminar by Cynthia Bourgeault talking about the practice of Centering Prayer. I had never heard of it before. The idea of connecting with God without having to talk to God appealed to me and my brain, full of cognitive dissonance. However, I didn’t stick with the practice. Some months passed before I began meeting with a wonderful spiritual director who encouraged me towards a consistent practice.

So when I was asked the question by my friend of why I didn’t just “throw the baby out with the bathwater,” I realized that my journey into the Great Unknowing began early in life, long before my search for healing showed me just how far I was from my authentic “Me,” a beloved one made in the *imago dei*. From early childhood, there has been a place within that no one has ever seen or heard or touched. A secret place where nobody could know me. A safe and quiet place where “Me” has been preserved. Like a little tornado shelter that was made just for me. I can visualize my little child self carefully climbing inward to the closet of my soul and resting in the shadows of Be Still and Know. I played games with God, I laughed and dreamed, snuggled into the presence of the Divine like child with a nurturing mother. Again and again, I returned to that place as time passed and I grew up. The place that was discovered during rainy day childhood soul-exploring and innocent theological curiosity became a place where I would flee for refuge. I have found that not even Time itself can cross the threshold – in this place I am ageless, childlike, beloved, sacred and abiding with the Divine. I don’t know much about the theology of the soul, but I think this is the place where God lives in me.

It is in this place that I meet God during Centering Prayer, a face to face encounter in the Silence. I am grateful to have found a community that shares this practice and welcomes my own journey.

(Amelia recently moved to the Valley. She is a singer, songwriter and performer. She found Contemplative Outreach of Phoenix on the internet and is now a member of one of our weekly zoom centering prayer groups.)

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What silence does - it morphs into the presence of God. So the silence is not just silence or emptiness or nothingness but the best preparation there is because then there's no obstacle. And then God's love - since it's so pervasive - just comes in, like the weather, and like it fills any empty space.

Thomas Keating



A Day of Community Connection, Mutual Sharing and Reflection

New Date in early 2021 will be announced soon.

Contemplative Outreach of Phoenix Service Team, along with some of our Centering Prayer community members have been meeting to plan the day. Due to the public health pandemic, the planning group is considering a virtual event. Watch our website www.contemplative-phoenix.org for THE NEW DATE and more details including registration information.



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