

CENTERING - A METHOD OF DIVINE EMBRACE by Daryl Berry

The greatest teachers of all religions encourage us to reach for a new way of life. They promise us that we can enjoy the kind of intimate, loving relationship with God that they themselves have experienced. They teach us that the “pearl of great price” can best be found within, that as God’s beloved children, we can receive the inner nurture and companionship which our divine Parent provides in every passing moment.

However, while we might *know* of their promise and *believe* it to varying degrees, how often do we actually *feel the presence of God*? Can we experience the utter peace of resting in God’s nourishing embrace, like a satisfied infant nestled in its mother’s arms? Is such intimacy with God really available to us, perhaps even on a daily basis?

For centuries the great teachers of spirituality have sought to develop contemplative methods, practices designed to aid in the approach to loving union with God. Thirty years ago a group of Trappist monks, inspired by Thomas Merton, began to recover the work of the great monastic contemplatives of the Middle Ages. They combined these methods and elements of eastern meditation into a simple discipline that any of us can practice in the midst of our busy lives. This silent practice of Centering is a deeply restful techniques of opening to God’s presence and action in the innermost recesses of our being.

The description of Centering which follows is adapted from the book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, by Thomas Keating, Abbot of the Trappist Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado.

Centering is the opening of mind and heart - our whole being - to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words, and emotions. We open our awareness to God whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing - closer than consciousness itself. Centering is a process of interior purification leading, if we consent, to divine union. During the time of centering, we consent to God’s presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God’s presence everywhere.



The Method of Centering

- I. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.
- II. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.
- III. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
- IV. At the end of the Centering period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes

Centering Guidelines

I. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.

1. The sacred word expresses our intention to be in God’s presence and to yield to the divine action
2. The sacred word can be chosen during a brief period of prayer asking the Spirit to inspire us with one that is especially suitable for us. Some examples are: Jesus, Abba, Father, Mother, Love, Peace, Shalom.
3. Having chosen a sacred word, we do not change it during the Centering period, for that would be to start thinking again.
4. A simple inward gaze upon God may be more suitable for some persons than the sacred word. In this case, one consents to God’s presence and action by turning inwardly toward God as if gazing upon him. The same guidelines apply to the sacred gaze as to the sacred word.

II. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.

1. By “sitting comfortably” is meant relatively comfortably; not so comfortably that we encourage sleep, but sitting comfortably enough to avoid thinking about the discomfort of our bodies during this time of Centering. Whatever sitting

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position we choose, we keep the back straight.

2. If we fall asleep, we continue the Centering process for a few minutes upon awakening if we can spare the time.
3. Centering in this way after a main meal may encourage drowsiness. It is better to wait at least an hour before Centering. Also, Centering just before retiring may disturb one's sleep pattern.
4. We close our eyes to let go of what is going on around and within us.
5. We introduce the sacred word inwardly and as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.

III. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.

1. "Thoughts" is an umbrella term for every perception including sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, reflections, and commentaries.
2. Thoughts are a normal part of Centering and occur often during the process.
3. By "returning ever-so-gently to the sacred word" a minimum of effort is indicated. This is the only activity we initiate during the time of Centering. During the course of Centering, the sacred word may become vague or even disappear.

IV. At the end of the Centering period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

1. The additional 2 or 3 minutes give the psyche time to readjust to the external senses and enable us to bring the atmosphere of silence into daily life.

Some Practical Points

* The minimum time for Centering is twenty minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first thing in the morning, and one in the afternoon or early evening.

* The end of the Centering period can be indicated by a timer, providing it does not have an audible tick or loud sound when it goes off.

* The principal effects of Centering are experienced in daily life, not in the period of Centering itself.

* We may notice slight pains or twitches in various parts of the body or a generalized restlessness. We may also notice heaviness or lightness in the extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness. In either case, we pay not attention or we allow the mind to rest briefly in the sensation, and then return to the sacred word.

Points for Further Development

1. During Centering, we avoid analyzing our experience, harboring expectations or aiming at some specific goal such as:
 - a. Repeating a sacred word continuously.
 - b. Having no thoughts.
 - c. Making the mind a blank.
 - d. Feeling peaceful or consoled.
 - e. Achieving a spiritual experience.
2. What Centering is not:
 - a. It is not a relaxation exercise.
 - b. It is not a form of self-hypnosis.
 - c. It is not limited to the "felt" presence of God.
3. What Centering is:
 - a. It is at the same time a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.
 - b. It is an exercise of faith, hope, and love.
 - c. It habituates us to the language of God, which is silence.

