

# The Practice of Welcoming Prayer



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## INTRODUCTION

THE WELCOMING PRAYER is the prayer practice of attending, letting go, and surrendering to God in the present moment of daily life. Developed by Contemplative Outreach's late master teacher Mary Mrozowski, it is based largely on the teaching and wisdom of Fr. Thomas Keating and the eighteenth-century work *Abandonment to Divine Providence* by Jean-Pierre de Caussade. It addresses the values of our false-self system on both conscious and unconscious levels. Because the conceptual background of the welcoming prayer challenges many of our commonly accepted cultural ways of viewing our own behavior and that of others, taking the time to examine that conceptual background may be helpful in an understanding and practice of the welcoming prayer.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABANDONMENT AND SURRENDER

*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you— you of little faith?*

~ Matthew 6:25-30<sup>1</sup>

Contemplative prayer has been called prayer of pure faith. As methods on the contemplative path, centering prayer and welcoming prayer may likewise be seen as prayer of pure faith. What does pure faith mean in this context? Simply put, it means trusting in God. It means trusting so fully that God will provide for us that, like the lilies of the field or the birds of the air, we are free of cares and concerns knowing that God will take care of us.

Talk about faith and trust is commonplace among Christians, but the kind of trust proposed here is hard for most people in our culture to accept. It goes against the grain of what the dominant culture teaches us. Our cultural conditioning tells us that we must be in charge, that we must carry out our own agendas, that we must make sure our affairs are in order, that we have to invest in our retirement plan because if we don't who will take care of us. If I

don't, who will? This attitude is often referred to as "taking care of number one." Self-reliance, the quality Emerson extolled, has long been the watchword of Americans.

The Protestant work ethic has pervaded American life. America is built on work. Not to work, not to work hard, not to work at something, is viewed not only as un-American but even as sinful. To be like the lilies of the field would mean neither toiling nor spinning. That sounds like not working, and not working is un-American.

But the American obsession with work confuses the issue. In terms of our relationship with God, the issue is not work but trust, specifically trust in God's support of our human doing and being. The job, so to speak, of the lilies is to sway in the breeze, to look beautiful, and to take in nutrients from the earth, air, and water. That is what they are and what they do. The job of human beings is much more complex, but it also involves being and doing. Our being and doing take many forms other than swaying in the breeze and looking beautiful. Some of those forms have to do with feeding ourselves, for us a task more demanding than taking in nutrients from the earth. And so, of course, we are meant to do this task with all of its component parts: to grow the grain, to grind it for flour, to bake the bread, and to find other good things to eat with it.

Trusting in God to provide does not mean standing around waiting for manna to fall from the sky. We have responsibility too. God expects us to do our part, whatever that may be according to our gifts and talents, but we do not have to do everything. We do not have to be God. If we let God be God, then we can be ourselves and do what we do in freedom from the awful burden of stress. We weren't made to carry the weight of the world any more than the lilies were. Think of what that weight would do to a lily. It crushes us just as surely.

We may experience the same kind of grace as lilies and birds if we allow ourselves to and if we cultivate trust through practice. If you have a hard time imagining such trust, poet Denise Levertov, in her poem "The Avowal," provides us with an image so vivid that we may almost feel it in our bodies.

*As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them,  
so would I learn to attain  
freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,  
knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.* <sup>2</sup>



The kind of trust Levertov describes sounds very much like abandonment. Mary Mrozowski, late co-founder and faculty member of Contemplative Outreach, based her magnum opus, what we now call the welcoming prayer practice, or simply welcoming prayer, largely on the early eighteenth-century work *Abandonment to Divine Providence* by Jean-Pierre de Caussade,<sup>3</sup> not a bestseller in our time. Its lack of popularity has at least something to do with de Caussade's choice of words, some we might include in our growing lexicon of words most fallen from favor in the twentieth century. Let's start at the beginning with the word *abandonment*, a word associated perhaps more closely with the covers of romance novels than with our relationship to God. The verb, *abandon*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means to give up to the control of another; to desert or leave without help; or to let oneself loose and rush headlong. In various forms, the word seems to have had both positive and negative connotations for centuries. In the fifteenth century, *abandoned* already meant forsaken or cast off. It meant also "self-given up to" something

outside of self. That "something" now is always seen as evil, the *OED* notes. Already in 1692, it meant profligate. By the nineteenth century *abandon* as a noun had come to mean "surrender to natural impulses; hence freedom from constraint or convention." *Abandon* had the connotation of unbridled sexuality or even lust, the kind depicted on some of those paperbacks. At the same time self-abandonment was used this way by the seventeenth-century poet Henry Vaughan: "True abandonment . . . the nearest way to God."<sup>4</sup>

Today the connotations of *abandonment* are no less mixed and have probably picked up even more negativity with images such as extreme neglect or abandonment of infants or children by their parents. But if we can set aside for a while our preconceptions of the word perhaps we can reclaim its significance for our relationship to God.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade wrote in the early eighteenth century in French. Perhaps the word *abandonment* had equally mixed connotations for him. I wonder if he used the word for its shock value. The Visitation nuns to whom he wrote must have noticed the word with alert attention. But his use was in line with that of earlier contemplatives, notably John of the Cross, who "had a profound influence on Caussade."<sup>5</sup>

The first chapter of de Caussade's book is called "On doing our part and leaving the rest to God" (22). We might take this title as his first definition of *abandonment*. To do the opposite of what de Caussade suggests, i.e. to assume that we must do it all, is perhaps the major obstacle to spiritual development. "Saint Teresa of Avila says that every difficulty in prayer comes from one fatal flaw, that of praying as if God were absent," Fr. Keating says in *Awakenings*. "Our spiritual journey as a whole has the same fatal flaw: seeking God as if he were absent."<sup>6</sup> When we go on the assumption that God is absent and we must do everything, it becomes almost impossible to discern anything about God's will. In fact, the idea

of God's will is repugnant to many contemporary people. If such a thing exists, many assume there is no way to know what it is.

Certainly discerning God's will is a subtle skill that must be developed over time through long practice and careful listening or obedience (another one of those words!). But to assume there is no such thing, that we can never know it, and that we are therefore in charge and must do it all is what some have called "functional atheism."<sup>7</sup> In order to become healed and whole, we must come to terms with the issue of God's will and our own will. Becoming healed and whole may eventually lead to holiness, which de Caussade equates with "complete loyalty to God's will" (24).

As we explore de Caussade further we come upon another word that gives many modern seekers difficulty: *surrender*. Abandonment is, de Caussade says, "the complete and entire surrender of [oneself] to God" (72). Like abandonment, surrender "has long been treated as a noxious concept in our society," Gerald May says.<sup>8</sup> The word *surrender* has come to be associated with victimization, coercion, and use of power to subjugate. It has come to suggest inappropriate passive yielding or an overpowering through unfair advantage. Undoubtedly many surrenders fit that negative definition. One woman put the objection this way: "Surrender to God is problematic for women in our patriarchal model because the image that exists is becoming a doormat. The church has been abusive to women, and so there is resistance to the idea of surrender." This objection is completely legitimate and understandable in the light of the experience of many women.

Not only women have problems with the concept of surrender, however. Gerald May sees the problems as more widespread. Our confusion over the term, he says,

*is deepened by the fact that too often we really are spineless and unassertive. Too often we do go along with the currents*

*of social whim or the desires of other people instead of standing up for what we sense is truly right within us. (4)*

May makes a clear distinction between the kind of surrender we are called to and inappropriate surrender:

*Such surrender to other people, institutions, or causes is . . . the opposite of true spiritual surrender. The destructiveness of such distortions is likely to make us fear any kind of surrender, spiritual or otherwise. (4)*

Despite this concerned caution about the word *surrender*, we need to reclaim the positive power of the word for Christian practice. The problem with the word occurs when we attribute our notions of weaker and stronger, male and female to our relationship with God. It doesn't work to analogize our uneven human relationships with that primary relationship. God is, of course, beyond our human concepts. We must remember here what May clarifies: we are not advocating inappropriate giving up of self to any other human being or to any human institution, but rather we are exploring our right and appropriate relationship to God.

Contemplative theologian Cynthia Bourgeault bravely began the process of reclamation in a class she called "Re-Learning Surrender." She sees surrender as transactional, "to put yourself into other hands." In our culture, the dominant message tells us, "Never surrender." Our own egos put up a fierce battle against surrender, but in opposition to this culturally conditioned message, Bourgeault boldly states, "A surrendering attitude is non-negotiable for your journeying into the Gospel."<sup>9</sup> "Knuckling under" is precisely what Christian surrender is not. Surrender is not passive, Bourgeault asserts, but rather "the active exercise of a receptive power." In yielding, we display or act out of strength, not weakness.

Centering prayer is a receptive form of meditation. Welcoming prayer is relatively more focused, or concentrative. However, both are what Bourgeault calls “surrender practice.” They train us in the core motion of our religious tradition— surrendering, letting go. In this way they are, as Bourgeault says in her workshops, our “boot camp in Gethsemani,” teaching us “Not my will but thine be done.” In her book *Mystical Hope*, Bourgeault beautifully states regarding centering prayer that “in this simple form of meditation we are practicing that core gesture of the Christian faith: total surrender of ourselves into the hands of God.”<sup>10</sup> Welcoming prayer helps us to extend that gesture throughout our days.

The desire to find some way to help practitioners of centering prayer to consent in this radical way, to extend the effects of letting go in daily life by continually consenting to God moment by moment, prompted Mary Mrozowski to devise the welcoming prayer practice. She recognized that “the most difficult thing for us is to let go.” For that reason, we need more than twenty minutes of centering prayer twice a day. The welcoming practice gives us something for the other twenty-three hours of the day, “a method of how to let go into the activities of your daily life, to let go of emotions, feelings, commentaries, and thoughts that control us.” When we let go of these emotions and feelings and commentaries, Mary Mrozowski said, “they are changed by God, by the spirit that dwells within us.” Even more important, we ourselves are transformed over time, so that the energy we have previously expended on clinging to our own programs and protecting our false-self system is freed up to be used for God’s work.

“Letting go”— those are words we may be more comfortable with than abandon and surrender. We know them from that famous phrase from Alcoholics Anonymous, “Let go and let God.” We may not be comfortable with the idea or be used to doing it, but it is not totally foreign and in our hearts we know it is what we need to do. The welcoming prayer helps us to put it into practice.



## INTENTIONS AND ACTIONS

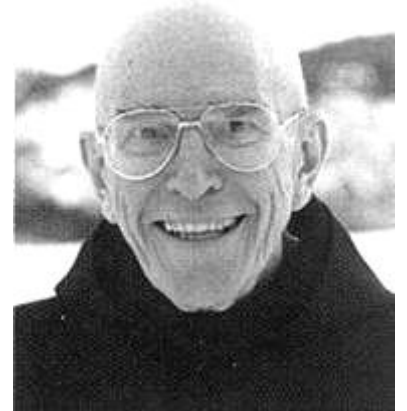
*I do not understand my own actions for I do not do what I want but I do the very thing that I hate. I can know what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want but the evil that I do not want is what I do.*

~ Romans 7:15, 18-20

The split between intentions and actions seems to be a universal of human experience. The apostle Paul poignantly captures our human dilemma in his famous passage from Romans. We want one thing and proceed to do something entirely different. We intend one thing and do another. Intention is a conscious aim or purpose toward something. It grows out of deliberation. If we live intentionally, we live with a purpose deliberately in mind and we pay attention to whether we are keeping our intention moment by moment. Intention implies a conscious choice on some level of awareness. As we deepen our level of spiritual awareness our intention may become clearer and purer, but until that happens our ability to remember or to keep our intention will probably waver.

Intention has often been described as the heart and soul of centering prayer. Our intention in centering prayer is to consent to God's presence and action within. We can extrapolate that intention into the rest of our lives, practicing God's presence in the other 23 hours of the day. We can carry that intention over into our relationships, intending to act as instruments of God's peace and love in all of our interactions and our actions. However, no matter how clear we may be about our intention, we may find it very difficult to carry it out, to live it wholly. What gets in our way? Often our unconscious motivations.

Fr. Keating has said that motivation is everything. Motivation is what prompts us to action. It shares its root word, meaning to move, with the word *motive*, which means some inner drive or impulse that causes a person to do something or to act in a certain way. In other words, motivation is any impulse, emotion, or desire that moves one to action, for example, greed.<sup>11</sup> In early childhood our motivations are appropriately developmental. Our needs for affection and esteem, control and power, safety and security move us to actions that will get those needs met. When a set of actions is successful in getting our needs met, the actions are reinforced and we repeat them. As we rely on the same set of actions again and again, our pattern of behavior establishes a lifetime program for happiness and a "false-self system," as Fr. Keating explains. As we mature, the pattern ceases to work the way it once did, yet like robots with only one or two programmed options for behavior, we continue in the same patterns over and over again hoping that they will eventually lead to the same success they did in infancy by bringing us happiness and contentment.



The motivations of many of our actions, if not most, grow out of these old programs. On a conscious level our motivation may be synonymous with our intention—to love and serve God, to practice God's presence in every moment, to be an instrument of God's peace and love in the world; on an unconscious level our pure motivation is laced with the desires of our false selves for affection/esteem, control/power, and safety/security. So much

energy clusters around these three sets of values that Fr. Keating has termed them “energy centers.”

As a result of this complex dynamic, our motives are usually mixed. Like Mary of Bethany’s sister Martha, we many times do the right thing for the wrong reasons. Like Martha, we lose sight of our deepest and purest intention when we get all tangled up in those mixed motives. The challenge is at least twofold. First, we must find ways to increase our awareness of what is happening within us in response to the stimuli that come to us from the world around us and from our fellow creatures. Second, when we are aware of reactions and mixed motivations, we need a way to remind ourselves of our purest intention and to return to it in our actions.

Martha’s over-identification with her role as the perfect hostess keeps her in the kitchen rather than listening to Jesus with Mary. As a result she is jealous of Mary and angry. I’m not sure about men, but I know of few women who haven’t at least sometime identified with Martha. Christmas Day is a prime example for me. Everyone except me is in the living room playing new games, visiting, and enjoying hors d’oeuvres. Meanwhile, after working for countless hours already, I am in the kitchen yet again struggling to get Christmas dinner together. No one appears in the kitchen to help until they invariably decide it’s time for a drink when I’m making the gravy, the task that makes me most nervous! It seems the preparations are never going to end. I want to be loving, I want to be serving, yet old anger and jealousy often come up. Why am I the one here again? Why isn’t somebody else back here helping me? Or if someone stays in the kitchen to help, I take it as a comment on my competence: “It’ll be Epiphany before we eat if someone doesn’t move things along!”

In situations such as this one mixed motivations rule. The deepest motive is to serve but other motivations create a complex web of emotions poised to ruin the gravy if not all of Christmas day. I

want to be out of the kitchen spending time with those I love, just “being,” and yet again I find myself trapped in the “doing.” What would it be like to sit at the foot of the Master? Why does Mary get to sit there when I’m stuck in here? Why doesn’t she ever help with the cooking? Who does she think she is? How does she think everything is going to get done if she doesn’t ever pitch in?

Feelings of anger and jealousy or other intense emotions may be symptoms that we are attached to our homemade programs for happiness and that our choices are leading us away from what God intends for us. The emotions we experience may be signs that we should be doing something else. At least they tell us if we continue our present course of action, we need to change our attitude about it. We think we need many things, like a clean house, a beautifully set table, and gravy without lumps. But Jesus says, “Martha, Martha you are anxious and troubled about many things. One thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion which should not be taken away from her.”





## ONE THING NEEDFUL

Scripture scholars and preachers, as well as armchair theologians, have spent countless minutes and countless pages of text defining the “one thing needful.” Many have seen Martha and Mary as exemplifying the active and the contemplative lives respectively. In *The Mystery of Christ*, Fr. Keating says, to the contrary, that

*the point of this story is not about which lifestyle is more perfect, but about the quality of Christian life. What Jesus disapproves of in Martha's behavior is not her good works, of which he is about to become the beneficiary, but her motive in doing them. The quality of one's service does not come from the activity itself, but from the purity of one's intention. The single eye of the Gospel is the eye of love, which is the desire to please God in all our actions, whatever these may be. Jesus' defense of Mary, who was sitting at his feet, is not an excuse for lazy folks to avoid the chores. But neither is it a motive for those who are working hard to get annoyed if those engaged in a contemplative lifestyle do not come forth to help them.*<sup>12</sup>

A contemplative attitude is characterized by love, and so, like Brother Lawrence, Martha could practice the presence of God while she prepares dinner (as could I). That is, she could do what she is doing with love. What she is doing is not the problem; rather the problem is the attitude she brings to the task.

In *The Contemplative Experience*, Joseph Chu-Cong also examines the story of Mary and Martha. Basing his thinking on the work of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Chu-Cong says that love is “not an option in pursuing the contemplative experience but . . . the essence of the experience.” He goes on to say that “this level of love . . .

is direct and all-absorbing. It subjects to itself all other faculties, including the very awareness of self. In this sense it is that ‘one thing necessary’ spoken about by Our Lord in St. Luke's Gospel.”<sup>13</sup>

The story of Mary and Martha “encourages us to seek the integration of action and prayer,” Fr. Keating tells us (*Mystery of Christ* 51). Something deeper than action or contemplation, underlying and unifying both, pulls Martha and Mary together. Those with a contemplative bias would call this unifying attitude a contemplative approach to life, but I believe that this bias reveals a misunderstanding of the relationship between action and contemplation. They are not two separate and distinct outlooks on life in opposition to each other. Rather they are two parts of every life and every human being, perhaps commingled in each of us in different proportions. Contemplation infuses and permeates action. Action without contemplation at its worst is barren, arrogant, and godless. “The contemplative state,” says Fr. Keating, “enables one to rest and act at the same time because one is rooted in the source of both rest and action.”<sup>14</sup>

And so Martha's problem is not that she has chosen an active role rather than a conventionally contemplative one. Rather it is that she is not present to the role she has chosen. She is not performing her tasks with love. The one needful thing is to be present, open to God in the present moment, and loving toward those around us, no matter what we are doing--whether we are in the kitchen cooking and cleaning up or whether we are sitting at the foot of the Master. In anything that we are doing, whether it is contemplative or active, we need to be present in the moment to



the movement of the Holy Spirit and open to love. We need to consent to God's presence and action in our lives. We hear this message over and over again from Jesus, from Jean-Pierre de Caussade, from spiritual teachers and seekers through the ages, from Thomas Keating and from Mary Mrozowski.



## THE ROLE OF WILL

We have said that centering prayer and the welcoming prayer are surrender practices. Over and over again, much like spiritual aerobics, they give us the opportunity to surrender. In a subtle internal motion we exercise the choice to return to our intention, to consent to God's presence and action in our lives. According to Fr. Keating it is an exercise of intention and consent. What Fr. Keating says about centering prayer can also be said of the welcoming prayer:

*It is our will, our faculty of choice, that we are cultivating. The will is also our faculty of spiritual love, which is primarily a choice. It may be accompanied by sentiments of love but does not require them. Divine love is not a feeling. It is a disposition or attitude of ongoing self-surrender and concern for others similar to the concern God has for us and every living thing.*<sup>15</sup>

Will is popularly conceived of as something our egos bring to bear on a situation to control it, to dominate it, to make things the way we want them to be. Apparently some people have success with this exercise of will. When I determine to use will power for accomplishing something or changing behavior, the pressure I bring to bear makes everything explode in my face, sometimes in ways that have caused me tremendous grief. In the aftermath of a bout of recurring rage, in my guilt, grief, remorse, and pain, I would declare, "I will never do that again." How short-lived my resolve in the face of how much I loved my family and how good my intentions were! My inability to sustain my resolve showed me clearly that there had to be something else to this reality besides my will by whatever name— resolve, willpower, willfulness. That kind of will, in my experience, may work for seeing some project through to completion or for accomplishing some goal, but in the most important aspect of our lives, when we are called to face our

own demons, it simply does not work. It is like holding oil under water. The demons will win, and our efforts will fail.

We are called to turn this situation around, to give in to our own helplessness and powerlessness, to surrender to what is beyond our control, to accept the reality that we cannot do anything about without God's help. What a relief in these situations to pray by saying, "God, I am helpless. I tried to exercise my will and look what happened. Failure big time. I give it over to you. Not my will but thine be done." I have to approach God with the realization of my own helplessness. I consent to God's presence and action in my life. I admit that I am not in control, I am not all-powerful, and I am glad to acknowledge that something much greater and wiser than I am is in control of all that happens. This "upside-down" way of seeing the will involves viewing our human strength not in controlling and mastering but, rather, in letting go into the Mystery beyond our understanding. We exercise our will in our consent, our choice, to return to God moment by moment. Through consent, our intention becomes manifest.

The human will manifests in at least two ways. One way is in an infantile omnipotence that tyrannizes and terrorizes, that says, "Do it my way or else." The other way is the spiritually mature will that says, "Not my will but thine be done." With practice our will may become the latter kind. Gerald May in, *Will and Spirit*, calls these two kinds of will *willfulness* and *willingness*. He equates willfulness with self-sufficiency, self-determination, control and mastery, and a basic attitude of saying no to life. Willingness he equates with self-surrender, mastery, and a basic attitude of saying yes to life (1-7). May says:

*Will is a given, but we are cursed by its tendency to expand into willfulness. The most popular modern resolutions of this problem have to do with seeing will as tempered and balanced by love. This is reflected in Carl Jung's statement, "Where*

*love rules, there is no will to power; and where power predominates, there love is lacking." Or in Rollo May's, "Will without love becomes manipulation." (37)*

May makes the astonishing observation that "we are all addicts" (41), that "addiction at its most fundamental level is a playing out of humanity's willful striving against the irrevocable mystery of consciousness and being" (40), and that in fact we are addicted to, among other things, our own willfulness (50). The cure for this wrong-headedness is an opening of the heart that softens us into willingness. It can come about by hitting "rock bottom," as May points out (51), or, if we are lucky, it can come about through contemplative practice.

In the traditional language of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, more language which may cause us to bristle, what we are seeking is "conformity of will," a disposition toward God that is so transparent as to be identical with God's disposition toward us. Chu-Cong points out that this is "Bernard's expression for the direct experience of a mutual embrace." "Unlike the agreement of the mind that is mediated through language," Chu-Cong writes, "the embrace of love is direct and perfectly intimate" (81).

## IN COMPLEMENT TO TWELVE STEPS

Insights into the limits of the human will have long been a part of the twelve-step tradition. Centering prayer, augmented by a practice of welcoming prayer, can complement the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. One longtime centering prayer practitioner, who is also a recovering alcoholic, makes this observation:

*With daily centering prayer in my life, an interesting thing began to happen. I longed to carry the awareness of God into my daily life, not just in the twenty-minute prayer times. I was told that centering prayer in daily life is a process of surrender and letting go. Years of practicing Step 3 ('we made a decision to turn our life and our will over to the care of God as we understand him') flashed through my mind's eye. In order to remain sober I had practiced Step 3 over and over, sometimes countless times in one day. 'Let go and let God,' I could tell the centering prayer folks, quoting one of the AA clichés by which we paraphrased Step 3. Father Martin's 'I can't— God can— I think I'll let him' came back to me in all its whimsical profundity.*

It is worth reflecting on each of the twelve steps to see how centering and welcoming offer the practices necessary to carry the steps out. Note particularly Steps 6, 11, and 12:

*Step 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.*

*Step 11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him,*

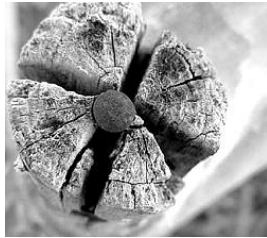
*praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.*

*Step 12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried . . . to practice these principles in all our affairs.<sup>16</sup>*



## ATTACHMENT

In the story of Martha and Mary, we have seen that Martha is over-identified with her role, or attached, in the same way that we are often attached to our roles, our thoughts, our feelings, and our agendas. Mary Dwyer, a longtime teacher of the welcoming practice, draws on Gerald May's wisdom when she points out that the word *attach* comes from the old French noun meaning *a nail* or verb meaning *to nail or to be nailed to*.<sup>17</sup> When we are attached to something, we are nailed to it, connected almost inextricably, or fastened securely. That is, we are so close that it is virtually impossible to separate us from what we are attached to. We are trapped, stuck, and can't get loose, like Brer Rabbit stuck to the tar baby. The kind of attachment we are concerned with here is our attachment to old obsolete programs for happiness put in place in early childhood. Over long use these have become thoroughly ingrained habits. They are the tapes that form the soundtrack of our lives and determine our choices and our actions. These programs are not bad in themselves. In childhood they served us well to get our instinctual needs met. Without them we would not have survived. The problem comes when we continue to use them like automatons when they aren't working any more in our present lives as adults. Yet they have solidified and ossified as demands clustering around the energy centers. These are "centers of motivation" related to the three major areas of instinctual needs: affection/esteem; control/power; safety/security (*Intimacy with God* 163).



Our programs for happiness around these centers worked when we were children and infants. Because we are born into the ongoing brokenness of the human condition, all of us experienced real or

perceived deprivation and found ways to get what we felt deprived of. But most often these same methods cease to work as we mature. What works for an infant does not work for a teenager or for a twenty-something, much less for a middle-aged adult. When we keep following these tracks, living out these tapes, over and over again trying to get our needs met in the same old ways, we run into trouble. This process is much like beating our heads against a brick wall: it creates pain, it leads nowhere, and it is rigid and unchanging. The frustration of expectations that results from this situation sets off all the afflictive emotions—anger, apathy, envy/jealousy, grief, lust/greed, pride—stored in our energy centers and waiting to cause us pain and misery. Because these emotions can create so much trouble for us and those around us, they naturally are of primary concern when we begin to dismantle the false-self system. (Pleasurable emotions can be stumbling blocks in our personal spiritual development just as surely as afflictive emotions, but they may be less dangerous to those around us.) When the afflictive emotions go off, we react with more or less disastrous results. That is when we need help.



## WE NEED A TOOL

We need a tool that will help us build in some distance from our own programs and attachments. Many tools exist. One good tool is the welcoming prayer practice. It can help us to bring hidden and unconscious motivations into awareness and then give us some objectivity about what is going on and how we are going to respond. There is a lot of wisdom in the old standby of counting to ten, but we can take steps beyond use of this basic tool to bring about some freedom in our actions. Centering prayer brings freedom over time. Welcoming prayer in the other twenty-three hours of the day gives us a boost to create freedom of choice in the moment and to reduce our own reactivity. The energy stored in our energy centers becomes activated when our emotional buttons are pushed. That energy must go somewhere; that is one of the laws of physics.

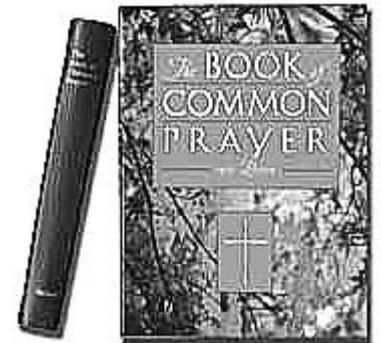


If we express the energy generated by the afflictive emotions in unconscious reaction, our actions will likely be inappropriate. The results will likely be disastrous or at least unfortunate. If we are able to open up a little breathing room between the trigger and the action, then we provide ourselves with an opportunity to discern what action is appropriate instead of acting out of our default programs. Our discernment may very well lead us to take action, just as Jesus repeatedly took action. In some cases, that action may be no more than an exchange of words. We may need to make an assertion about our feelings; we may need to confront someone about abusive behavior; we may be led into a major conflict that takes all of our communication skills and our spiritual resources. But with God's help we can handle any

of these situations in ways that are appropriate and in line with what God would have us do as instruments of God's peace and love in the world.

We begin then through centering prayer, welcoming prayer and other practices to peel the layers away, like peeling the layers of an onion. Perhaps peeling off the outer layers reveals the true self. Or we begin to untangle the intertwined vines of the true self and the false self. It probably is not as simple as ripping off a mask to expose a shining, sweet perfect image of God beneath! And the process of peeling or disentangling may take our whole lives. Through our practices of centering prayer and welcoming prayer we can get to work. More importantly we can make ourselves available for God's healing action. It is easy to fool ourselves about our motivations and intentions. We can easily deny the reality of what is going on in our lives. We can refuse to acknowledge, or even to feel, our feelings because in our misguided fashion we are trying to avoid the pain that comes with so much of our feeling. But the longer we continue denying and avoiding the longer we live in the pain. It is only by "changing the direction in which we look for happiness," as Fr. Keating says, that we can find a less painful way. Truth to tell that way brings its pain, too, but the pain is offset by a much deeper and greater joy.

The baptismal covenant in The Book of Common Prayer asks this question: "Will you persevere in resisting evil and whenever you fall into sin repent and return to the Lord?"<sup>18</sup> When the presider asks this question in the liturgy, everyone in the congregation answers resoundingly, "I will with God's help!" And heaven knows we need a lot of God's help because promising to return to God *whenever*

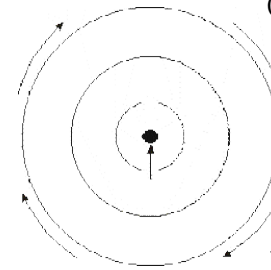


we fall away from our deepest intention is a huge commitment. Note the wording of the question: *whenever, not if*. In other words, there is no question of whether we will fall into sin. We inevitably will. It's not if but when. We fall away continually, and perhaps most of the time we aren't even aware that we are falling. And thus what follows, as night follows day, is that we must repent and return, i.e. we must remember, we must climb back out of the hole of our own making, or "change the direction in which we are looking for happiness." Repentance, says Fr. Keating, is "that fundamental call in the gospel to begin the healing process" (*Intimacy with God* 74). A Buddhist expression says, "Fall down seven times, get up eight." Perhaps the number of times we get up again is almost infinite.

Systematic theologian Paul Tillich speculates that the word *sin* may have the same root as the word *asunder*. He equates sin with separation— separation from ourselves, from each other, and from God.<sup>19</sup> In other places Tillich uses the word *estrangement* to define sin. In *Will and Spirit*, Gerald May, from a more psychological perspective, says that "sin occurs when self-image and personal willfulness become so important that one forgets, represses, or denies one's true nature, one's absolute connectedness and grounding in the divine power that creates and sustains the cosmos" (233). May goes on to say, "This happens whenever attachment is severe" (233). Contemplative practice, including centering prayer, welcoming prayer, and other practices, is all about letting go of our own attachments and agendas. What happens when we do that? Where then will our motivation come from when we have let go of attachments? Gerald May answers, "As attachment ceases to be your motivation, your actions become expressions of divine love" (238).

As our own agendas dwindle, Fr. Keating assures us, the action of the Holy Spirit takes over. The movement of contemplative prayer over time is "a process of moving from the simplified activity of

waiting upon God to the ever increasing predominance of the gifts of the Spirit as the source of one's prayer" (*Intimacy* 162). In other words, the spirit takes over when we get out of the way.



Centering prayer and welcoming prayer both begin to bring the unconscious material of our energy centers and false selves into conscious awareness. This process is not always pleasant, and in fact is sometimes downright painful. But what could be more worthwhile! Gradually God is healing and transforming us in this process, and, when the painful or unpleasant parts come into awareness at last, we find freedom. When not acting consciously, we are just rats in a maze. We are acting out of our old programs, our old tapes, our old habits, out of automatic functioning. We are acting as if we are machines instead of human beings made in the image of God with a birthright of freedom. If we can become aware of our own programs for happiness, our own hidden agendas, then we can make an active choice in the moment ever faithful to God.

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<sup>3</sup> *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, trans. John Beevers (New York: Doubleday Image, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971 ed., s.v. "abandonment" and "abandon."

<sup>5</sup> John Beevers, trans. In his introduction to *Abandonment to Divine Providence*.14.

<sup>6</sup> *Awakenings* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 88.

<sup>8</sup> *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1982), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, "Re-Learning Surrender: Christian Transformation as Radical Consent," a course taught at Vancouver School of Theology, Vancouver, British Columbia, July 17-21, 2000. Many of the ideas Bourgeault took up in this course have also appeared in her written work. See, for example, her recent book *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2004), in which she includes a chapter about the welcoming prayer. See also her earlier article "Centering Prayer as Radical Consent," *Sewanee*

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<sup>17</sup> Gerald G. May, *Addiction & Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 3.

<sup>18</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (The Seabury Press, 1979), 304.

<sup>19</sup> *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 154-55.