

Letting Go, Letting God

The Contemplative Society is a quiet presence in the Diocese of B.C offering retreats, wisdom schools, and workshops. My involvement with the Society and with Centering Prayer has changed my life. I hope I speak to someone's heart here in the way mine was spoken to several years ago.

When I was baptized into the church 16 years ago, I entered with a lot of questions. One of those was "What is prayer? How does one pray?"

People had different suggestions for me. But I kept returning to the concern that my prayer seemed to be very Selinde-centred. I wanted to be *directed*, not directive. I wanted to be open to *God's* thoughts. I was tired of my own.

When I heard Christopher Page, speaking about the different forms of Christian prayer, describe contemplative prayer my heart leapt. The description he gave sounded like a promise. It called to mind the words we pray each Sunday:

*"Glory to God, whose power, working in us,
can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."*

I wanted to rest, fully trusting, in the presence of an all knowing, loving God, and be open to be directed and recreated. After a one-day introduction workshop with Christopher and Heather Page, I began practicing Centering Prayer. My appreciation for this practice grows. I experience the fruits of my prayer life with amazement and gratitude.

Several years ago, when our neighbour was struggling with terminal cancer, she began praying and meditating. One day, towards the end, she said, "If I had developed a practice years ago it would be such a comfort to me now." She was facing the ultimate form of letting go.

Our lives are filled with "letting go's." Think of it. From the moment a child is born, we begin letting go. Raising children is full of letting go's and before we know it, they move away from home. The childhood pet dies. A close friend or an acquaintance dies. Then our own parents die. Suddenly we find ourselves as the elder in our family and community. Some day we too will die. We will have to release the final knot in the string of letting go's. We fight this reality. But if one thing is certain about life - it's that we have to let go of it. We have no choice. But if we practice letting go a little bit every day, hopefully we can do that final letting go with grace.

Centering Prayer helps us face the constant “letting go’s” in life. How? For 20 minutes every morning, I practice my “letting go” muscle. As I sit in prayer, every time a thought comes up, I let it go. I don’t resist or judge myself for having a thought. I simply let the thought go. And briefly return to my sacred word which reminds me of my intention - to sit quietly with God. Over and over, I practice this letting go of thoughts. If I get confused about why I’m practicing, I think of Jesus. His life was not a spiritual practice that culminated in peace and success (as we think of them). No, his life was one of surrender. And in the end, he let go utterly... on the cross. Jesus is the master of letting go and teaches us, through example, the power of letting go.

The psychologist Rollo May says, “In between stimulus and response lies our freedom.” Herein lies a simple, profound, powerful, transformational secret. One that Jesus seems to have known all about. Jesus didn’t control what was happening to him – he didn’t control the “stimuli” of life. He didn’t react either. Jesus was the master of *response*. His responses were firmly grounded in his connection with God. In this connection he was surrendered; trusting and obedient.

Centering Prayer makes me more aware of the space between stimulus and response. It’s as short as the intake of a breath. It’s easy to miss. Instead reacting like an automaton, I now *sometimes* perceive that I have a choice: I can allow a knee jerk reaction, or, I can breathe and open to some other, less immediate possibility. I have become less predictable. I find myself laughing instead of feeling hurt or upset. I reach out instead of becoming self-protective. I choose the lighter way, the less hurtful way... for myself and for others.

So much of my own suffering has to do with being reactive. If I simply let go, I make room for the Holy Spirit to move - to open my mind and heart to a different way of seeing. What joy and peace there is letting go, what creativity!

I’m not perfect at Centering Prayer. I don’t have to be. It’s a practice, not a goal. When I fall away, I don’t get bogged down with self-recrimination. That just prolongs the agony. All I do is return to my 20 minute sit. I don’t pretend to know what God is doing during my prayer time, or in my life. That’s not my business. My business is to simply show up and ask for God to be present and active in my life. The rest is miracle.... my life unfolds in ways I could never ask for, or imagine.

Centering Prayer is an ancient form of Christian prayer that helps me let go of my preferences. When I think I know how my life should, or what my family, or church should be like, I cramp the Spirit. But if I let go of thinking I know what’s

best, I trust that all things work unto good; especially when I don't understand or enjoy how my life is unfolding; or when life is really difficult. So when I let go of the crazy desire to understand and control God, I find peace. As one saint said, "*The mind creates the abyss and the heart crosses it.*" Centering Prayer develops the heart muscle: the muscle that relaxes and allows the connection with God.

I love life, and I'm practicing letting go... sounds paradoxical, doesn't it?! Jesus turns everything upside down. If I want to save my life, I must lose it. I think Jesus is orienting me to this upside-down view of the world. I trust I'm developing ears to hear and eyes to see.

Centering Prayer is simple. It's easy. And somehow, it's neither. Why? Because being human involves getting discouraged, feeling lazy, losing interest. But when I fall off the wagon, I hear the call to return. I respond. I return to my 20 minute sit to find connection and acceptance. It's beyond me, really. I just let go of thinking I know what this mystery is all about!

Centering Prayer has been an answer to prayer. It both stabilizes and me. It's not the only effective form of prayer. There are many.

Centering Prayer can be practiced alone or with others. I'm fortunate to have a prayer companion in my husband. I need support so I attend retreats and workshops. In some churches in this diocese, people gather regularly to do Centering Prayer.

Centering Prayer is one Christian tradition I had not been aware until 3 years ago. My desire is to let people in the church know of its presence and potential.

For more information about Centering Prayer, check out the Contemplative Society website at www.contemplative.org or call (250) 381-9650 for information. You'll find talks, workshops and amazing resources (books, CDs, etc.) listed on the website. Speakers are available to come to your church or group.

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