Spirituality
Soul Seeing



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As I drove down the New York State Thruway, headed toward what promised to be an inspiring event on the legacy of Trappist Fr. Thomas Keating and the Centering Prayer movement, I was anything but centered or prayerful.

The state of the world and the state of my own interior life felt chaotic, divided, depressing. Despite the welcome sunshine after a stretch of gray upstate weather, I felt smothered in a blanket of melancholy verging on hopelessness. Why am I even going to this event? I wondered as the miles passed by and I listened to Keating's *Open Mind, Open Heart* audiobook in an attempt to get my head into the "right" place.

When I pulled up to the Garrison Institute, a former Capuchin Seminary on the banks of the Hudson River, I felt my shoulders relax away from my ears and my breath deepen as the reality of spending the next 36 hours steeped in spiritual riches loosened the grip of darkness and anxiety.

As I unpacked my bags, I could feel a sacred energy moving about the place, a sense that spiritual seekers were beginning to amass, bringing not only their travel essentials but a hunger for the holy. When I settled into contemplation in my room, I moved so quickly and deeply into prayer that I knew it wasn't anything I had done, but rather the collective of this group and its intention.

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Over the course of the next day and a half, I met people from around the world who had traveled long distances to be part of the experience. As I talked with a woman from Montreal and a Methodist minister from Memphis, I began to feel the division of our outside world give way to a melting pot of religions and beliefs, practices and personalities. Finally, Cynthia Bourgeault made her way to the stage. Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest, author and the definitive living voice on Centering Prayer, called us to begin the symposium in the only way that made sense: in silence.

"Uncross yourselves," she said, in reference to the practice of sitting with feet uncrossed and planted firmly on the ground and arms uncrossed and resting gently in the lap. "Unless you are Buddhist, then cross yourself any way you'd like," she added, smiling. "And if you're Catholic, cross yourself the usual way." And so began our first session of communal contemplative prayer, with laughter and lightness and

a sense of joy.

The event brought together people of all faiths and no particular faith. We heard from a Buddhist monk who was close friends with Keating and from a Catholic monk who led us in song and reminded us that the deep work of contemplative prayer can lead to new solutions to old problems. We heard from physicists who talked about quantum entanglement and from family members who shared personal stories of Keating's journey. It was a beautiful display of our common bonds rather than our theological differences. No one talked about dogma; no one was there to convert. Rather, everyone was there to celebrate our shared spiritual journey, one that leads us ever closer to the Creator who loves each one of us without limit or condition.

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As the group closed out the day chanting *kyrie elesion* a capella and with harmonies, there was a powerful feeling of the Spirit moving among us, binding us to God, to each other and to the larger world. I left there feeling hopeful about the world for the first time in months, not because anything major had changed — in fact it had only declined further — but because I had seen in this group of seekers the unitive spirit of faith, hope and love.

Driving back north, I felt carried by the chants and prayers, the mealtime conversations and powerful presentations. I was stunned by how my inner view of the outer world could be transformed so quickly and completely (at least for a time) by the shared practice of contemplation and community.

When I returned home, I told my husband Dennis that I wanted to start a Centering Prayer group at our parish. He was surprised at first. After all, contemplation is a solitary, silent practice, so why drive across town and plan a gathering when I could just pad upstairs to my personal prayer space? But bringing together contemplatives to pray in silent community offers not only encouragement to individuals but fosters the beautiful spiritual energy that arises when two or three are gathered in God's name. In much the same way that those who pray the rosary privately benefit from

joining others in the communal praying of that beloved devotion.

Months later, I still come back to the lessons I took home from that day on the Hudson River: a hunger for a community, a place where silence moves like a spiritual stream flowing between us and out into the world, a place where division gives way to harmony, and practice leads us ever closer to presence.