

Adaptation of Centering Prayer: An Integration of The Relaxation Response and Centering Prayer

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Before proceeding let's review again the difference in *Contemplative Prayer* and *Centering Prayer*.

Contemplative Prayer:

“. . . the development of one's relationship with Christ to the point of communing beyond words, thoughts, feelings, and the multiplication of particular acts;" It is "a process of interior transformation, a conversation initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union." Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, pgs. 146, 4.

Remember that Contemplative Prayer is not "a prayer expressed in words in a given time frame." It is an ongoing dialogue with God that goes beyond mere words. In my perspective, Contemplative Prayer is experiencing God's Presence ultimately in a lifestyle of consciousness of God, intimacy with God. One that enables us to see our world through the eyes of Jesus and respond in Jesus fashion. Living God's Presence leads to actions that are often counter-cultural, and not necessarily in one's best interest at the moment. It is reflected in the spirit of the martyrs who did not need to give lengthy thought or consideration when given the option of allegiance to another or death. As Dallas Willard would say, the Kingdom of God was their reality.

Centering Prayer:

". . . is a method. . . to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift." "During the time of prayer, we consent to God's presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God's presence everywhere else." Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 139.

Centering Prayer is a method, a technique for elicitation of readiness on the part of the one seeking to consent to God's presence and action within. In a word, it is getting oneself ready to experience God's presence by blocking out distractions and focusing on a word or phrase that symbolizes one's willingness to experience God and surrender to his initiative.

How does Centering Prayer differ from The Relaxation Response*?

As a cardiologist Dr. Benson's research was designed to extract from the meditations of various religions the *process* used to elicit a physical state of relaxation accompanied by lowering of the heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure and muscle tension. Thomas Keating and others, including myself, believe that the existential questions of the meaning and purpose of life underlie all other issues human beings face. There has to be more to life than relaxation and feeling physical relief from stress. Note that this comes from a researcher in the field of stress and creator of a model for reducing stress. It also comes from one who has used The Relaxation Response individually and in college classrooms, retreat settings and other groups for some twenty-five years. Before I knew the term Contemplative Prayer I sought God's Presence in my

life and before I had heard of Centering Prayer I was using The Relaxation Response to “center” myself in preparation for listening and responding to what I believe to be God’s graceful guidance of my life.

I believe we have the option of gaining benefit from both techniques. It is my hope that one using The Relaxation Response will experience the One who *designed* the parasympathetic nervous system as a pathway, not only to stress reduction, but to a life of intimacy with the very same Designer. The same One that gives meaning to our lives through a life of faith. It likewise is my hope that believers will not be threatened by a process built into the body by the very same Designer, but will enjoy the health benefits that may add years to their lives and enrichment beyond measure.

What do The Relaxation Response and Centering Prayer have in common?

1. Both advise sitting quietly in a comfortable position
2. Both recommend closing your eyes
3. Both recommend the use of a word or phrase as your focus
4. Both encourage a minimum time to experience the event
5. Both encourage returning to chosen word or phrase when distracting thoughts occur
6. Both encourage remaining still for a few minutes afterwards
7. Both discourage the exercise following meals
8. Both recommend using exercise two periods a day
9. Both indicate that the effects of the exercise have residual or accumulative value over time
10. Both discourage analyzing the experience during the event, having certain expectations or attempting specific goals

Preparation for Adapted Centering Prayer (ACP)

Before beginning the ACP discipline determine why you are doing this. I would encourage you to have NO expectations at all. No ideas of any sort of supernatural or mystical experience, just that you are opening yourself to experience whatever God has for you today. ACP is about readiness, openness, awareness of God’s Presence and whatever implications that may have specifically for you. No one can tell you what that is or is not. This is a unique experience between you and God, if you are open to it. There may be no emotion or there may be a great deal of it. Whatever you do or don’t feel is not a measure of its effectiveness in the long run. This is a discipline not a onetime shot at God, or God’s onetime shot at you.

1. **Choose a sacred word.** It can be any word that has a deeply spiritual meaning for you. I started out using RR with the word, “one,” which was recommend by Dr. Benson due to its neutrality of meaning. However, it was not neutral to me. I capitalized it and made it my own. From our Lord’s “intercessory prayer,” (John 17) he prayed passionately for his disciples and even for us today [bold type mine]:
Verse 11: “Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be **one**, even as we are **one**.”
Verse 20: “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be **one**; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I

in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou has sent me.”

Verse 22-23: “The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be **one** even as we are **one**, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly **one**, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou has loved me.

Verse 26: “I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.” [“one” implied strongly] (RSV)

Over the years I have chosen other words and phrases such as, “I love you, Lord.” or “Thank you, Lord.” But, I find myself going back to “One” because of the meaning it has brought to the experience and the memorable associations I’ve had with its use in when I felt “One” with God and my brothers and sisters in Christ.

2. **Choose a quiet place and specific time.** Allow twenty minutes for the exercise. As you become more proficient you will be able to take ten minute breaks and still gain benefit from it. Practice it twice a day for two weeks before you draw any conclusions as to its effectiveness for you. Make it your place and time for spiritual formation. Phones deactivated, computers silenced, pagers off, close the doors, train others to respect that space and time frame. Be persistent and consistent that you will dedicate this time to be open to God’s Presence. No alarms set, but a clock or watch you can check briefly if necessary.
3. **Choose a comfortable position.** For most people this means sitting with feet flat on the floor, hands resting in lap and back comfortably straight. If you have tight fitting cloths you may want to loosen them or choose something else to wear.
4. **Practice progressive muscle relaxation.** Start with your toes and work through all muscles, including head and facial muscles. Focus on each muscle group letting go of the tightness and sometimes even tightening those muscles and releasing them so that you can feel the process of relaxation better. Visualize a warm wave of relaxation moving over your body as you move toes to head, releasing the tension from your body.
5. **Practice centering breathing.** Begin to inhale, drawing the breath through your nostrils, down deep in to the center of your body. Feel the coolness of the air as it passes through your nostrils deep into your body. Make the breaths long and deep, counting to four slowly as you inhale and beginning to notice how warm the air is as it leaves your body. Imagine the oxygen you are drawing into your body filled with life-giving and healing powers as it permeates you entire body, repairing it and enriching its organs throughout your entire body. As you exhale, imagine harmful toxins leaving your body and being replaced with healing and life-giving oxygen as you breathe in.
6. **Begin using your sacred word silently as you exhale.** Continue to count to four as you inhale until you no longer need the counting to extend your inhaling sufficiently. As you exhale through your nose silently repeat the sacred word. As you continue this process your mind will be inclined to wander off, chasing all kinds of thoughts. No problem. Just return to the word, repeating it as you exhale again and again. If you continue to bring your focus back to the word while exhaling, you might try following the air as it passes through your nostrils deep into your body. Mentally, traveling with the air in and

out as you repeat your sacred word while exhaling will, most of the time, elicit a state of rest equal to many hours of sleep, although you are awake.

This condition, sometimes referred to as the “alpha” state, creates a capacity for awareness (sometimes called “mindfulness”) that enables you to listen, to “hear” at a level you may never have imagined. But it is beyond the limitations of the senses. It is here that you may experience God’s Presence and either be aware of it or recognize it in the hours and days to follow. This much we know. The accumulative effect of this discipline over weeks and months will accomplish the following: First, the positive effect on your health is a given, backed up by years of research. Second, in the experience of the Christian seeking intimacy with God, there is a very good possibility that you will experience something that will over time change the way you see yourself and the world. My own story is that I doubt I would still be alive without this discipline. I consider it a gift of God through which he has enabled me to see myself, God and others through a different set of lenses.

7. **Rest in God’s Presence.** Do not see this process as something you can use in your teaching, preaching, counseling or coaching. Or, yes, writing. It has taken me many decades to bring myself to write about this. Why? Because I am a novice, and always will be learning. Oh yes, this approach to prayer will impact what you do professionally, but you cannot go into it with a “continuing education” mindset. Just drink it in. Enjoy being “One” with God. Celebrate in your private moments what it’s like to go inward to find God and outward to share him. This time with God will open your mind to passages of scripture you have read a thousand times and never imagined the deeper messages specifically for you. You will see people differently, even those you can’t stand. This time with God will make you painfully aware of how big your sins really are and how painful it is for God when you judge others so harshly.

I would recommend using the above guidelines as you begin learning to use this Adapted Centering Prayer (ACP) discipline. As you use it again and again, it will become a part of your memory and you will need no guidelines at all. You may see this discipline as nothing more than a relaxation or stress reducing exercise. It is up to you to apply these guidelines to your own spiritual formation. If you are not seeking to know God more intimately, there is no mechanism that will help you. But the core of Benson’s research into the essential ingredients of this type of meditative practice has authenticated its value in reducing stress and producing many other positive results for our health and wellbeing in a stress-prone world.

*References to The Relaxation Response (RR) are from Harvard cardiologist, Herbert Benson’s book, *The Relaxation Response*, and other Benson publications. Dr. McGee was trained in RR by Dr. Benson in 1989.

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