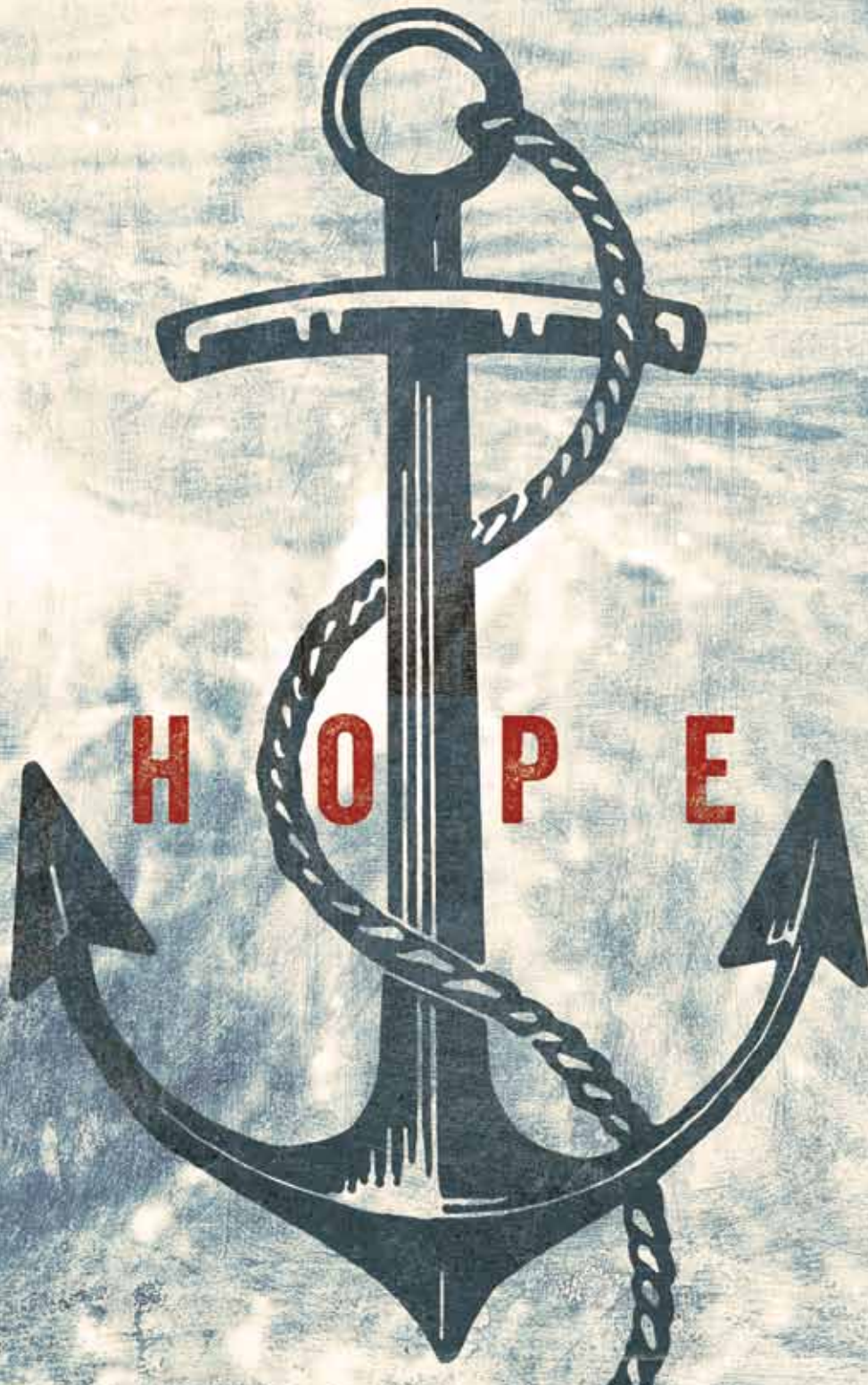


# IMMERSE

A JOURNAL OF FAITH, LIFE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

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Barefoot exists to provide youth workers with effective ministry tools and resources. Our deepest desire with the *Immerse Journal* is to partner with you in guiding students into spiritual formation for the mission of God. This is why we have sought content that ensues the shaping of the whole of a youth worker's life. We believe that if *your* life is being transformed, you will be able to aid in the transformation of others.



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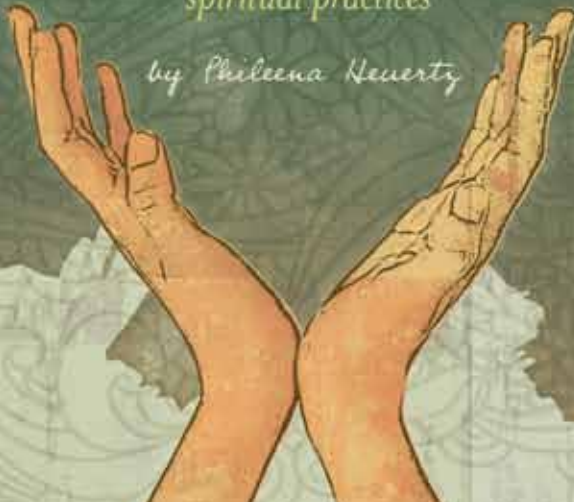
B E C O M I N G   A

*Contemplative*

**ACTIVIST**

.....  
*Transforming the world through  
spiritual practices*

*by Phileena Heuerty*



## Sierra Leone is one of the most devastated countries in the world and one of the places I hold most dear to my heart.

My husband, Chris, and I made our first visit to Freetown at the peak of the war over blood diamonds. At that time, 60% of the country was still controlled by the rebels, and injured refugees, displaced children and victims of brutal amputations poured into the capital city. When we returned home to Omaha, we processed our experience with some friends around our dining table. After we described the horrific, traumatic human suffering we had witnessed, my friend looked at me and asked, "Do you ever doubt the goodness of God?"

Tears immediately welled in my eyes, and it was like a confession for me. Yes, I doubted the goodness of God, but is that okay? I'm a Christian, and I should be confident in the goodness of God. But in those moments of inner turmoil, I wasn't.

Not long after this confession I met Fr. Thomas Keating, a modern Cistercian monk who has given himself to recovering the Christian contemplative tradition. In 2004 he introduced me to centering prayer, and my life has never been the same. The practice of sitting still in silent, letting-go prayer twice a day for a minimum of 20 minutes per day has taught me how to rest in God and allowed some of my illusions to be dismantled.

In time, I have found the courage to face some of the worst parts of myself that I was blind to before—perceptions of myself, God and others and exploitative ways I interacted with the world, like the unconscious motivation of loving others not for the sake of love alone but for what I would get in return.

As the practice of centering prayer became more established in my life, old paradigms loosened and crumbled, and a new creation began to take root and blossom. The fruits of the spirit have be-

come more evident. I am more accepting and patient, with myself and others.

### Dismantling Illusions

For 17 years, I've served among the most vulnerable of the world's poor. I'm compelled to action by the vulnerabilities of children forced into civil combat, children with HIV and AIDS, abandoned children, children living on the streets, women and children enslaved in the commercial sex industry and widows abandoned by their families. As a community we enter these dark and desperate realities and find the reign of God. Our faith drives our social action.

My faith and inevitable need for spiritual formation in the context of social activism made me receptive to contemplative spirituality. After many years of befriending victims of some of the worst atrocities, I was in need of a calm and grounded center that could withstand the buffeting of a world full of injustice. Contemplative prayer became an oasis in an active life that had become arid.

In the broadest sense of the word, contemplation means creating sacred space to be still, to rest in God, to reflect, to look inward; to attend to the inner life; to simply be with God in solitude, silence and stillness. Contemplation can also be understood as Parker Palmer describes: "anything that dismantles our illusions."<sup>1</sup>

Fr. Thomas Keating defines contemplation this way:

The essence of contemplation is the trusting and loving faith by which God both elevates the human person and purifies the conscious and unconscious obstacles in us that oppose the values of the gospel and the work of the Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Keating brought to the forefront centering prayer—making isolated, monastic

contemplative prayer accessible to lay people. A master of psychology and spirituality, he examines what it means to be human in a holistic way. Understanding the depths of the mind, will and emotions, he is able to connect the teachings of Christ to the most vulnerable parts of our human condition. In his book *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation*, Keating outlines three basic programs for happiness, of which he says each of us usually over identifies with one: power and control; affection and esteem; or security and survival.

These programs for happiness invariably conflict with one another so that the space between us becomes toxic. None of our relationships will offer us the power and control, affection and esteem or security and survival to the extent that we need.

Keating says that these three programs for happiness emerge from basic biological needs. It is a natural part of our human development to seek a degree of power and control, affection and esteem and security and survival. The problem is that, in time, we over identify with one by way of compensating for that basic need, which may have gone largely unmet in our childhood; thus, the false self gains fuel for its existence. This intensifies when we over identify with a particular group or culture. Temperament also plays into the false self. Experiencing anxiety and frustration is often a sign that in the unconscious there is an emotional program for happiness that has just been triggered.<sup>3</sup>

Do you ever have an overly emotional reaction to a situation or a relationship and later wonder why you reacted so strongly? As we grow in self-awareness, we often realize that some of our reactions to present circumstances are actually reactions to past events buried in the

**After many years of befriending victims of some of the worst atrocities, I was in need of a calm and grounded center that could withstand the buffeting of a world full of injustice. Contemplative prayer became an oasis in an active life that had become arid.**

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unconscious. The current situation provides a trigger for the unresolved anguish. When we recognize the agony surfacing, we have experienced grace. This is an invitation to greater wholeness. Contemplative spirituality supports us in that growth.

### **True Repentance**

I've been a Christian all my life. My father was the pastor of a conservative evangelical church. I attended church at least three times a week growing up. I was baptized at the age of nine and devoted myself to prayer and reading Scripture. As a teenager, I often turned to the Bible for guidance about life's most pressing adolescent issues.

In college I grew in my faith and relationship with God. I remember having a life-altering encounter with God's grace—God's acceptance of me with all my sins. But even with all that Christian formation, I still struggled to live in my belovedness. I cognitively understood that God loved me, but I lived more from a place of fear that I could lose that love by wrong thinking or wrong behavior. I did not experience the freedom that my faith propelled me to search for. I struggled with self-image and feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. I felt less likely to offend God if I remained hidden.

The framework of the first 30 years of my life was pretty much defined by either-or, in-out, saved-unsaved thinking. I didn't want to do anything that might anger God or cause me to fall out of God's grace or, God forbid, lead someone else astray. I was still the same good, Christian girl I'd always been. Then God took hold of me through contemplative prayer.

Change is the cornerstone of Christian life. In Jesus' first recorded message in the gospels, he calls us to change. The Greek word *metanoia* literally means change your mind. Somehow we didn't capture the meaning of this then or now. Being stuck in dualistic religious and cultural paradigms, when Jesus says *metanoia* we hear, "Change your behavior." But behavior follows thinking. How we think, perceive and sift reality causes us to live in certain ways. Jesus seems to be saying we cannot see and enter the kingdom of God unless our *minds* are transformed. And this is something we cannot do for ourselves. It is done *to* us.

What does it mean to have our minds changed and transformed? Could it be the difference between dual and non-dual thinking?

Jesus is a master of non-dualism. For example, he says paradoxical and contradictory things like, "The kingdom of God is within you...in your midst...is coming." The dualistic mind cannot grasp this. Which is it, Jesus? Is the kingdom is within me, in my midst or coming? It cannot be all three.

Jesus' life is full of paradox. He says he didn't come to abolish the Jewish law but to fulfill it. And then he apparently breaks the law of the Sabbath by healing people and letting his disciples pick grain, as well as other infractions. Which is it, Jesus? Do you honor the Jewish law, or not?

Non-dual thinking is the art of both/and, rather than either/or.

Not much has changed in 2,000 years

since Jesus walked the earth. We still struggle to grasp his teaching and let it transform us. We are still more likely to choose religious belief systems and dogmas over people. We still struggle to embrace the kingdom of God now, within us, as we look longingly for a kingdom that is somewhere out there, perhaps to be finally found after we die. But Jesus is all about inviting us into the *now*, the present kingdom—offering us living water and abundant life. How can we embrace the mysteries of the now and not-yet kingdom if not for a change of mind?

Dualistic thinking needs boundaries, security and certainty (law). Non-dual or contemplative thinking transcends boundaries, security and certainty. And at periods of time when the Spirit is doing this revolutionary work of changing our minds, it feels like our boundaries, security and certainty are being abolished. But in truth we are being *expanded*.

Contemplative practices aid this process of mind renewal and transformation.

Contemplative living, or non-dual thinking, is harmonizing. It allows us to overcome violent distinctions and conflicts—like what I experienced after years engaging a world of need—and helps us perceive our tiny part in the whole universe, or even in the body of Christ. When dualism is our predominant mode of functioning, we are subject to all kinds of fierce divisions—racism, social inequality, homophobia, earth degradation. At our worst, we are capable of human exploitation, murder and genocide.

...even with all that Christian formation, I still struggled to live in my belovedness. I cognitively understood that God loved me, but I lived more from a place of fear that I could lose that love by wrong thinking or wrong behavior. I did not experience the freedom that my faith propelled me to search for. I struggled with self-image and feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. I felt less likely to offend God if I remained hidden.



## Making space for the contemplative dimension of our relationship with God requires courage. In time, through contemplative prayer, whoever we think we are, we find out we're not. The spiritual journey provides the most painless way to discover that.

Contemplation affirms our need for a spiritual revolution.<sup>4</sup> It reminds us that God is God, and I am not. A lifestyle of contemplation fosters personal and communal transformation.

### Power in Practice

There's a common phrase in spiritual formation circles—spiritual practices—to refer to various prayers we can make a part of our life. I'll never forget how Phyllis Tickle explained this in a talk she gave: "Let's be honest. Spiritual practices are *disciplines*, and none of us like to be disciplined."

She's right. Most of us are repelled by the notion of discipline. But we also recognize that if we want to be good at anything, we have to be devoted to it and discipline ourselves to the refinement process. Musicians and athletes understand this.

After meeting Fr. Keating and being introduced to centering prayer, I recognized that I needed this practice in my life like I need water to drink. At that point I was desperate for a deep, authentic connection with God. So I went to my favorite chair in my study, every morning and every afternoon, for 20 minutes to let go of my grasp on and attachment to life in still, silent prayer.

Contemplative prayer practices are indeed more to us like disciplines than prayer as we've been accustomed to understand it. That's because the dominant type of prayer that has been taught in modern Western Christianity relates to our faculties of reason, imagination, memory, feelings and will. In this type of prayer we remain largely in control.

By contrast, contemplative prayer teaches us to temporarily let go of our normal faculties and engage our spiritual senses. This type of prayer is a practice in letting go of our egos and surrendering to the presence of God.

In contrast to contemporary prayer, the fruit of contemplative prayer is not looked for or found during the prayer time. In fact, the prayer time itself can seem dull. And we are easily distracted by a myriad of thoughts and mental conversations. But as we practice the prayer, the contemplative space within us is cultivated by the Holy Spirit and over time produces a garden of abundant fruit in our active lives. The fruit we strive to cultivate on our own pales in comparison.

Making space for the contemplative dimension of our relationship with God requires courage. In time, through contemplative prayer, whoever we think we are, we find out we're not. The spiritual journey provides the most painless way to discover that. Instead of grasping and crafting our identities, we lay them down and arise transformed.

### Relearning How to Pray Breath Prayer<sup>5</sup>

Probably the best known breath prayer is called the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This prayer originated in the Christian tradition around the sixth century. A great deal has been written about it. It became popular in the Eastern Christian church during the 14th and 19th centuries, especially in Russia and Greece.

The breath prayer is a good example of "praying without ceasing," as Paul admonished us to do, and has the potential to become as natural as breathing. On the inhale, invoke your name for God; on the exhale, express your need or your praise. When beginning, repeat your prayer in rhythm with your breath for five minutes, patiently working up to 15- or 20-minute sits.

There's no limit to developing your breath prayer. It may be the same from day to day, or it may change. Sometimes you may want to reverse the practice by sitting in silence and letting the Spirit pray through you. Ask for God to reveal *your* name and God's desire for *you*. This can be a profound experience. You may wind up hearing something like, "Beloved, you are enough," or, "Mighty One, rest." Wait on God and see how you may be renewed.

### Centering Prayer<sup>6</sup>

Centering prayer is the only prayer practice I've found that incorporates all three qualities of solitude, silence and stillness. These qualities are essential in teaching me to identify with Christ during his crucifixion.

In the solitude we identify with Jesus' experience of abandonment which corresponds to the program of happiness for security and survival; in the silence we identify with Jesus' experience of anonymity, corresponding to the program for affection and esteem; and through stillness we identify with Jesus' experience of powerlessness, corresponding to the need for power and control. This kind of identification opens us to the transformation that the cross points to.

Centering prayer prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, in which we experience God's presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.

By choosing a sacred word as your symbol of consent to the action of God within you, you let go of your thoughts by returning to it as often as you notice you are distracted from the silence. Sitting in an upright, attentive posture supports your desire to give God your undivided surrender.

When beginning, take time to work up to a solid, 20-minute prayer sit. And then progress to a minimum of two sits per day. For some this is the most difficult prayer practice. Be patient with and non-judgmental of yourself. Give yourself six months of serious practice before you determine whether it's for you.

### The Fruit

The life of a contemplative believer is a well-watered garden. Because the soul has been nurtured along the way, it will bear fruit in due season. I find that after years of cultivating my garden soul, I am much more peaceful. I am still engaged in a world of immense suffering, but I am less attached to it. I grieve with my friends who suffer, and I labor for their freedom, but I am anchored in a deep trust in the God whose rain falls on the just and unjust alike. I am more lighthearted and cheerful and able to celebrate more, even in the midst of injustice and pain.

When we are hard pressed, the fruit of the prayer will be revealed. There's never a dull moment in my work, and the work never ends. I could work 16 hours a day, and still there would be more work to do. Instead of being ag-

gressively and anxiously attached to the demands, I am more receptive to Holy Spirit's priorities for me each day. And I can more easily let go of the needs and demands I am unable to attend to. As time goes on, my vocation becomes more and more refined. I accept the fact that I cannot do everything, but I am created to do a few things well.

Prior to adopting a contemplative activism posture, I tended to be pulled away by the tidal wave emotions of others, losing myself in their wake. But after much time in contemplative prayer, I have more self-control. I maintain my sense of self while responding (rather than reacting) to the actions and needs of those around me.

The contemplative believer is far from perfect. I wrestle and struggle with the same challenges everyone faces. But I am more receptive to the gifts and ordeals that come my way, rooted in a deep well of faith and love.

A contemplative posture is what makes Jesus' message about dying to self possible. All the great religions recognize the need to discipline the human mind and body to be receptive to the presence of God, the life energy that sustains us all. Left to our own impulses, we make a mess of things. But through the rich contemplative traditions of the church, we tap into the river of life that changes everything—beginning with us—from the inside out. And the leaves of the trees that are meant for the healing of nations really come about.<sup>7</sup>

As we grow in relationship with Christ, particularly through contemplation, an expansive, transcendent mode of taking in and processing and living moral codes and religious dogmas becomes possible. And this new way of thinking, this changed mind, makes it possible for us to live more like Jesus—the one who unconditionally loves, includes, accepts, forgives, extends mercy and brings unity.

1. Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 1990), p. 17.
2. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 45.
3. Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 30.
4. Ephesians 4:20-24, The Inclusive Bible.
5. Adapted from St. Augustine by-the-Sea Episcopal Church website. For complete information about this form of prayer, read *The Breath of Life: A Simple Way to Pray*, by Ron Del Bene, published by Upper Room Books, 1992.
6. Informational Pamphlet on Centering Prayer can be found at [www.centeringprayer.com](http://www.centeringprayer.com).
7. Ezekiel 47:12, Revelation 22:2

Phileena is co-director of Word Made Flesh, an international community serving the most vulnerable of the world's poor. Her first book, *Pilgrimage of a Soul* (InterVarsity Press 2010), is a provocative theological narrative steeped in contemplative spirituality. For more information on these and other contemplative prayers visit Phileena's blog at [www.phileena.com](http://www.phileena.com).



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