



The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

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Session 12: Practice for Daily Life: The Welcoming Prayer¹

Introduction: Fr. Thomas was once heard to say that next to Centering Prayer, the Welcoming Prayer is our second most important prayer practice. We have Centering Prayer for an hour a day and the Welcoming Prayer for the other twenty-three. While this video is not a “how to” on the Welcoming Prayer, it provides the conceptual background that underlies the prayer practice—dismantling the emotional programs for happiness.

How can we identify the programs when they go off? Here is just one suggestion. This I regard as the heart of the daily practice, from the perspective of the Centering Prayer dynamic, and that is, when you notice you're upset by something, even mildly upset, and that upset could be any one of the afflictive emotions—fear or anger or frustration or depression or something—notice the event that triggered that feeling. Was it that someone didn't acknowledge you. Someone that you love didn't send you a birthday card. A situation you can't control. The event points to what emotional program for happiness was upset. Sometimes it's not too clear, and it doesn't have to be absolutely clear because maybe two or all three of them have something to do with the present upset. But the issue is not so much to be certain as to exactly what emotional program you're doing, but to let go deliberately of the program itself in the unconscious by saying to oneself, of course, I give up my desire for security. Then say, I give up my desire for inordinate affection and approval, and finally I give up my desire for power or control.

There's also a saying that sums up all three, but it doesn't identify them, but sometimes you don't have time to go through that little menu. We suggest you say, I give up my desire to change the situation. Boy is that a hard one to say! But you don't just say that with the lips, but from the bottom of your heart you say, I give up my desire to change the situation. It sounds as if you were lying to yourself, I know, but it's not feelings that count here, but what you do with the feelings, and what you're doing with the feelings here is deciding that you're going to let go of them, and again, you're dealing with the Holy Spirit so you give up your desire and give this as a gift to God or the Spirit or the higher power as you know them.

So, by doing this practice for a few weeks, you begin to see how often this emotional program actually goes on in your life. This alerts you to the fact that how much energy must exist in this particular energy center. So, it not only alerts you to a greater self-knowledge and alertness in daily life to spot it and let go of it promptly, but sometimes, you know, it catches you by surprise and you're engulfed in feelings of pain or anger and it's almost impossible to think. Well, then you're not going to be able to identify the particular cause, but still you say the process which at least gives a message to the unconscious that life is going to change from here on in. I give up my desire.

Now, it's the desire for security or the craving for security, the unlimited character of the desire that is the problem, that is the source of the frustrating feelings and the afflictive emotions, and that is only partially conscious because some of it may just be dawning on us as a result of the spiritual journey, but the real problem is in the unconscious where most of the energy is hidden from us, and the process of the spiritual staircase—you're always, while living in this life, getting deeper insight into the problem and so that one can make a greater surrender to it.

Just to share a personal experience, there was a situation in my life that involved you know a lot of other people, the good of Contemplative Outreach. It was partially a misunderstanding between members in our particular organization who were in leadership roles, and there got to be very serious tension. I couldn't do anything about it, to resolve it, but everybody was looking to me as the president of the board of trustees to fix this thing. And so, every now and then there'd be a new explosion and I would literally feel as if I was in hell. Because all I could feel was this utter misery, the utter emotional anger that was coming from very strong personalities. And you know if you do any counseling that sometimes you absorb the emotions of others. Well, I just felt I was being completely dumped upon by this thing, and I was helpless, there was no umbrella, I was just getting soaking wet with sheer emotional rage and anger and misunderstanding, and I couldn't help thinking that there must be a better way of going to heaven than this. I don't need this at my time of life. I've got a lot of other things to do. This on top of all of my engagements and lectures and trying to you know act as if nothing was happening. For two or three days, it was just as if my whole being were immersed in absolute ugliness, misery, evil, and I couldn't do a thing about it except just sit there.

That happens every now and then, I think as the spiritual journey advances there are more intense moments than the dark nights even, but they're very brief. If they weren't brief enough, I think you would die. I think you would throw in the towel or something. But, all proportion guarded, those experiences of being emotionally thrust into a kind of pit where you can't get rid of the feeling or the misery or the grief or the hatred or the resentment, the bitterness. And this of course does a job on the body. You get exhausted. You may have, you know, heart trouble. You may get an ulcer if this keeps up long enough, all the other hazards. But it's still based on a feeling, however justified in itself, that it could be, I will not diagnose myself here because I was hopeless, but you have the feeling of sheer helplessness in the face of conditions that are overwhelming, that just couldn't be more impossible. You can imagine.

I have a very strong conviction now that you'll experience in daily life more incredible situations than anyone could ever write a novel about. Real life is more unbelievable than any imagination could conceive of because, I think, basically the spiritual journey is this trip into the unknown and so you don't know, you don't know what it's like. Hence the need for gratitude for the basic goodness and for trust that somehow God is going to bring all this purification to a very happy ending both for us. And the happy ending seems to be, what should I say, that you just forget about yourself anyway. In other words, no fixed point of reference. When God saw that I couldn't be in a worse place, and that I accepted that, then he took it away.

And once you understand this then difficulties are, I think, unbearable difficulties, you can get through them. While they're still unbearable, you know that God is simply moving you to a new level on the spiral staircase. And there's always another one, I think, where you're invited to accept, surrender yourself at a deeper level. And so, whatever there was in me—this happened, this repeated, you know maybe six or eight times in the course of two or three years. So, I knew there must be something I was holding back or otherwise God wouldn't have kept repeating this same situation.

So, to sit something through that's unbearable with trust in God may take a little time and it's true that it's so serious that sometimes it may have psychological effects and one might need some medication or some psychotherapy. Depends on who you are and where you are and that's where some spiritual guidance at this some point in your spiritual journey that has some expertise and some experience is a great help, but sometimes God doesn't give you that either, you just have to sweat it out. So daily life is the battlefield, and the Centering Prayer is the preparation of your resources for that daily experience of difficulties, and these can become more intense as the spiritual life develops, and so does your trust, so does your confidence in God.

So, return then to the basic thrust, I'd like to return to this idea of identifying our upsetting moments as not just upsetting, or somebody else has interfered with my day or the weather or an earthquake or something else. It's noticing an upsetting emotion and immediately saying, I've got a problem, not projecting it on other people or events. The fact that I feel upset at all is a sign that one of the emotional programs is still in place, and hence it's appropriate then to give that up. In other words, it's a question of letting go of the ordinary thrust of our way of interpreting daily life, and of course those who are very extroverted probably have a little more trouble at this than others. There're not geared to be instantly reflective. But if you can just step back and have that intention for a moment, insofar as circumstance allow, and say, I'll think about this at least, later on, then when you come to your daily examine of conscience or your daily inventory, to notice how many times during the day you felt upset, and what was the nature of the event and what emotional center it pointed to, and sort of conclude the day with a determined, peaceful and trusting surrender of that program. I give up my desire to control. I give up my desire for approval. Approval, control, and security are not the problem. It's our exaggerated demand for the symbols of those things in the culture which is unrealistic.

God wants us to feel secure but to have true security which is the confidence in God's protection. He wants us to have true freedom, which is better than control and power, which is the true power, you might say, the freedom to decide what to do with our emotions. And finally, God is the fullness of love that heals our demands for approval and affection and esteem. The divine affirmation in prayer is more profound than any kind of affirmation.

ⁱ For more information on the Welcoming Prayer as taught by Contemplative Outreach go to www.contemplativeoutreach.org. Under the "Practice" tab click on "Welcoming Prayer."