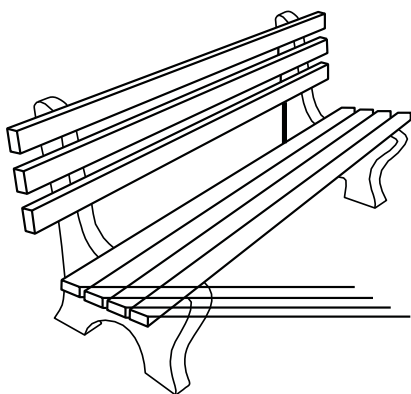


Sitting with God

A Journey to Your
True Self Through
Centering Prayer



Rich Lewis has given us a book that leads us into the heart and healing of centering prayer. Rich speaks carefully and humbly about his spiritual journey and what he has discovered. He offers readers a gracious introduction and invitation to partake in this soulful practice that will deepen their faith lives.

—**J. Brent Bill, author of *Holy Silence***

This book is for both the beginner and those who want to go deeper in both knowing and experiencing Jesus. Lewis will show you the way.

—**Nicholas Amato, author of *Living in God***

Rich Lewis's book is a beautiful account of one man's path into the richness of God-centered meditative prayer. This also makes it a most accessible and thoughtful invitation to others to take that same journey. Sprinkled with insightful quotes from other writers, Lewis, in an unusually thoughtful and loving way, makes an attractive, practical case for accessing the presence of God not only in prayer but in all facets of life. Highly recommended.

—**Paul Smith, author of *Is Your God Big Enough?
Close Enough? You ~~Big~~***

This is a wonderful book! Informative and encouraging, practical and profound, Rich Lewis's writing is earnest, clear, direct, humble, and winsome—more like a letter from a helpful and knowledgeable friend than a dry textbook. Whether you are new to contemplative spirituality or have been at it for a while and seek to deepen your practice, this book will inspire you.

—**Daniel P. Coleman, author of *Presence and Process***

This is a book for those of us who seek a deeper, more spiritual relationship with the Divine, free from the tyranny of words. Widely and deeply read, Rich Lewis writes a simple text that is enriched with wonderful quotes from some of the most inspirational thinkers of our time, so that every page is a revelation. In his quiet, unassuming way, Lewis shares his own experiences and shows us how we too can journey to the silent heart of God.

—**Rebecca de Saintonge, author of *One Yellow Door***

This book is a testimony to the transforming power of God's love working through the regular practice of centering prayer. In this book, Rich Lewis shares generously of his own journey to centering prayer and the

difference it makes in his life. His love of God and the spiritual life is contagious, and is sure to encourage the reader to set aside time each day to let God be God through the practice of centering prayer.

—**Dr. Philip St. Romain, author of *Reflecting on the Serenity Prayer***

I first met Rich Lewis when he was a senior at the University of Pittsburgh. It has been a joy reading how centering prayer has helped Rich transform his relationship with God, with others and with himself. I encourage you to read Rich's book and begin to experience the transforming power of centering prayer in your own life!

—**Rev. Dr. Deborah Winters, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Palmer Theological Seminary of Eastern University**

We are a people in search of meaning. But it is a rare person who plumbs the depths of life to find it. Rich is one such soul. Herein lies a courageous invitation to find God and in so doing, find yourself. I wish more people would turn to contemplative practice as Rich has done. It's people like him who light our way.

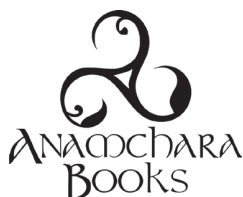
—**Phileena Heuertz, author of *Mindful Silence***

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RICH LEWIS



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Author's Note: *I intentionally use male and female pronouns for God interchangeably because God is beyond such limiting designations. And I consistently gravitate to feminine pronouns, especially when it comes to writing about prayer.*

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*Dedicated to my wife,
Trina Lewis, and our three
wonderful children:
Benjamin, Gabriella, & Joshua.*

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Modern western culture,
especially in America,
has done its best
to keep these two figures,
the Jesus of history and
the Jesus of faith,
from ever meeting.

—N.T. Wright¹

As we move toward the center,
our own being and the divine being
become more and more
mysteriously interwoven.

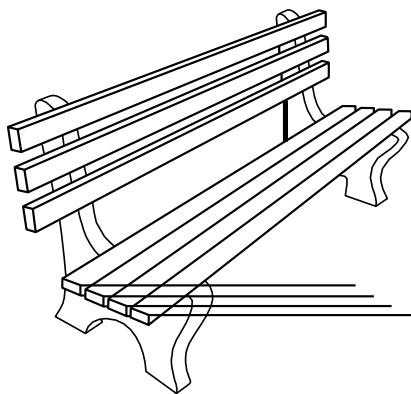
—Cynthia Bourgeault²

In the deepest forms of prayer . . .
we experience the absolute
or nondual aspect
of Jesus (Jesus' Divinity).
When we return from prayer
we experience the relative
or dualistic aspect of Jesus
once again (Jesus' humanity).

—Amos Smith³

The Word became flesh
and lived among us.

—John 1:14



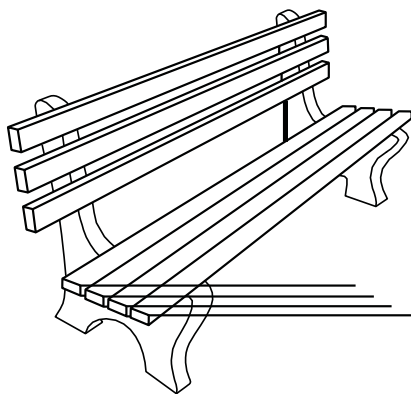
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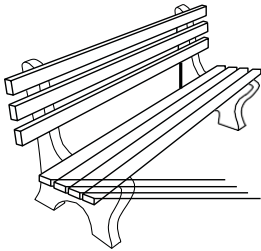
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Foreword

CARL J. ARICO

Rich Lewis does not let us settle for an ordinary way of looking at prayer or Jesus.

The power of prayer, properly understood, opens the door to the Mystery of God. Prayer is best seen as a relationship that touches all the levels of a dynamic relationship.

I often challenge couples to look at their love for one another as a glimpse into our relationship with God—a union, and with time, a unity between one another. Their relationships move from acquaintanceship, to friendliness, to friendship, to union, and if they surrender more to one another in the Holy Spirit, into unity. Each level feeds on the other.

In our Christian tradition, levels of relationship intimacy manifest in types of prayer—vocal prayer, meditation, affective prayer, and contemplation (simply put, to read, to reflect, to respond and to rest). The challenge is that we have been taught how to read, reflect, and respond in a com-

pulsory way, but we have not been taught how to truly rest in life or in prayer (Matthew 11:28).

Rich introduces centering prayer as a prayer of resting in God's presence and consenting to God's action—the desire to be in union with God. The image I like is allowing Jesus to wash our feet (John 13:1–17). Before beginning *Rich's* book, I invite you to read the Gospel of John as he shares the events of the Last Supper. It is a celebration of union and unity, especially as they break bread together—they become companions on the journey (John 13:1–14:7).

The name *Jesus Christ* opens us to a fuller awareness of him. It is a good reminder that we are not dealing with another outstanding human being, healer, miracle worker, teacher, founder of a religion, social worker, or champion of the marginal, but the Son of God, true God and true human. *Christ* has been here from the beginning of time and even before time. *Jesus* was the name he was given when he became human in the fullness of time.

John's Gospel states: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). If we believe this, it means when there was nothing—no-thing—Christ was there. He loved God, and God loved him, and in that dynamic of love came the Holy

Spirit. Their circular dance created and sustained the world as we know it—and as we are still getting to know it, to the point of being one with it, not separate from it. So God has been a living relationship from the beginning. And whatever exists has the presence of God because God is existence. Nothing can exist without God.

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:3–5).

Now the awesome revelation: “The Word became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

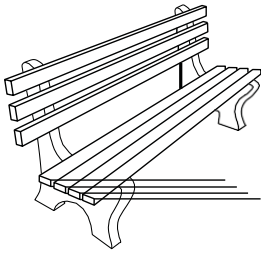
The good news is that this Word did not just live among us in the past tense. The living Word is available to us in the present moment when we pray. It also nudges us throughout the day. This is the good news of Rich’s book: that the Word is a dynamic presence that was not only experienced long ago, but can be experienced today in the context of a normal life.

Rich Lewis reveals the wisdom of the mystics for our contemporary world—that we can experience Union with God in Christ here and now. When the story of salvation unfolded, in the

beginning there was the sense that humankind was separate from God—that we had to earn God’s love. But with the coming of Jesus, our eyes and hearts can be opened to see that there is no separation from God in Christ. We can experience not only Union, but Unity, unity with the Divine, so we can say, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20), and “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

As Saint Ignatius of Loyola prayed:

O Christ Jesus, when all is darkness and we feel our weakness and helplessness, give us the sense of Your Presence, Your Love and Your Strength. Help us to have perfect trust in Your protecting love and strengthening power, so that nothing may frighten or worry us, for, living close to You, we shall see Your Hand, Your Purpose, Your Will through all things. Amen



Foreword

AMOS SMITH

Rich and I have worked together on Recovering Christianity's Mystic Roots (RCMR5.org) since 2014. In our work there has been synergy beyond what could have materialized individually.

RCMR5 has expanded into a social network. Most of this is Rich's doing. He is a natural at reaching out and finding ways to mutually enrich contemplative ministries. Rich has also branched out with SilenceTeaches.com, an engaging website that draws contributors and followers from all over the contemplative Christian map.

Rich and I are brothers on the walk, each with our particular angle and gifts. We have much in common, including love for family, a rooted faith, and a dedication to contemplative Christianity. I realized early on that Rich's passion was centering prayer. And I noticed that as his practice deepened, so did his presence. Rich will tell you that as a result of his centering prayer he is more solid and joyful and that this has shown up in

his job and family life. These are not mere words. They are reflected in the lines in his face and the light behind his eyes.

What I admire about Rich's writing is its simplicity and absence of pretense. Whereas I can go off on philosophical tangents, Rich keeps his two feet on the ground. Rich's grounded and sincere delivery makes him readily accessible. He builds the scaffolding from point A to point B. His sentences are short and to the point. He is nothing if not honest, especially about his passion for centering prayer. And his passion is rooted in his experience of God's Real Presence⁴ through prayer.

I like how Rich adapts his centering prayer to his busy life as a husband, parent, and employee of a large corporation. For example, he found that his "relaxed efficiency" at work improved when on his lunch break, he went to his car in the parking lot and did centering prayer there. He came back refreshed and more efficient. "Relaxed efficiency" is a wonderful phrase that holds the creative tension between the demands of a corporate work environment (efficiency) and the fruits of committed centering prayer (profound relaxation). This kind of synergy and integration are the hope for twenty-first-century contemplative arts.

For Rich, there is no hyper-image consciousness. There is no deliberation about perception

management. Rich simply shows up and speaks his truth, which is disarming and refreshing. For today more than ever we need two qualities in our leaders: first, to show up and second, to speak their truth. We are all called to speak the truth that only we can speak. In this book, Rich speaks his unique truth, which has the potential to restore vivid awareness of God's real presence and action within and to heal our nervous systems. Centering prayer is not just cerebral. It is a holistic healing art that releases decades of accumulated chronic stress encamped in tense muscles throughout the body.

Some criticisms I have heard about centering prayer in recent years are that it is for academics, the upper classes, or monks and cloistered folk. The fact that Rich is a normal middle-class family man, who goes to a normal job in a cubicle for a large company, counters this. Centering prayer is no more relegated to elite cliques than is running or playing guitar. It is a profound and ancient art form available to anyone with the discipline to try and keep trying.

Years ago, I observed Rich's gifts of brevity and truth-telling. I also observed how the Jesus Paradox, as conceived in the minds of the Alexandrian mystics,⁵ took a hold of his prayer life and imagination. Now, years later, these gifts

have turned into a book. And this book is what I hoped it would be—writing not intended for a preselected group, but aimed at a normal slice of Americana.

Twenty-first-century Christianity needs a viable anchor that is not given to the polarizing extremes of its left and right wings. And Rich Lewis is an apt navigator, grounding his sentences in personal experience and his reverence for “that of God in everyone.”⁶ If there is anyone who can see past reductionist labels and pigeon-holing to our underlying humanity, it is Rich Lewis.

There have been times on my journey when I needed a grounded word of inspiration, and Rich delivered it with agility and precision. I hope this book does the same for you.

In addition to reading the book, communicate with Rich online. You will notice on his website SilenceTeaches.com that there are many opportunities for continuing education, including centering-prayer resources, newsletters, and the opportunity for one-on-one centering-prayer coaching. And you will find Rich accessible. Miraculously, he has shed the one-step-removed and aloof diseases of our times.

Most of all, I hope you give centering prayer a dedicated try. In other words, I hope you commit to at least thirty consecutive days of centering

prayer, slowly increasing the disciplined silences to twenty minutes. As Rich reiterates throughout the book, the regular practice of centering prayer will surprise and transform you.

God in Christ (Colossians 3:3) has called Rich and me to relay the life-giving wonders of centering prayer. And let's be clear, neither Rich nor I are special. We simply show up daily to the chair and the cushion. Like good musicians, every day we practice our scales. Some days we may curse the chair before we sit. That's all part of the long-term journey. Practicing scales, so to speak, day in and day out, nothing more, nothing less—that is what we are called to do.

We are drawn to the primordial silent melodies. They bathe us in ancient waters of calm and of natural great peace. And we hear Jesus whisper through our relaxed minds and nervous systems: “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). And that deep rest is why we keep coming back, rain or shine, year in and year out. That deep restorative and transformative rest⁷ is exactly what our hassled twenty-first-century minds and bodies need most.

As I write this foreword in 2020, the United States is reeling from the Covid-19 pandemic. This pandemic has convinced me that centering

prayer is what we need more than the talking heads. Covid-19 has convinced us all of the profound uncertainty of our times. The wild fires in California, the pandemic, the consistent aberrant storms scientifically tied to climate change—these phantoms have either swept through our abodes leaving death and destruction or we have narrowly escaped. Either way, now more than ever we need stable people, people who have learned how to quiet their minds.

Just one family member, who knows serenity and composure when hell is unleashed, can make the difference. Someone steeped in disciplined silences can make the difference between the survival and eventual prosperity of family and community members on the one hand, and implosion and self-destructive angst on the other.

Our prayer life and presence make Christianity real and relevant in our fretful over-caffeinated multitasking times. It is an accomplishment to balance the fears, demanding pace, and technology of our times with silence and stillness. May we live into the depth and compelling truth of balance, and may deep-seated balance set us on a path to abundant life (John 10:10).

Our presence is our most integrated and compelling gospel witness. May we be contemplative witnesses to our families and communities.⁸ That

witness may not necessarily dazzle. Most often, to survive and thrive and to know balance and peace is enough.

Introduction

I came that they may have life,
and have it abundantly.

—**John 10:10**

In 2013, I began to dabble in silent prayer, a term that's often used as synonymous with centering prayer. I had heard and read that silence can transform you. I wanted to experience this transformation too.

I would force myself to sit in silence. I began to test how long I could sit there. I started with one minute and increased it to three and even four minutes. It was difficult!

Silence and silent prayer are counter-cultural. They are very challenging to cultivate because everything in our culture seems to point in another direction. Yet, surprisingly, it is in silence that I have found profound transforma-

tion. And that is the motivation for writing this book. I want to share what I have discovered. The point of this book is to share my centering-prayer sojourn with you. My hope is that my journey will help you with your journey.

Centering prayer is not a race. It is a long-term marathon. Centering prayer practiced daily, monthly, yearly will transform you. It does not replace other forms of prayer; it complements them.

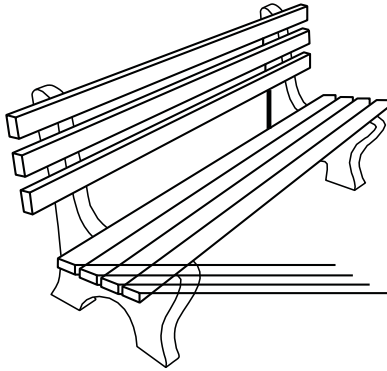
Centering prayer has changed my life and the way I think. It has been so life-giving that I cannot keep it to myself. I have to share it.

—Rich Lewis

PART ONE



The Life of Prayer



Jesus would withdraw to
deserted places and pray.

—**Luke 5:16**

Chapter 1



BEGINNER'S MIND



Contemplative Prayer is the world
in which God can do anything.

To move into that realm
is the greatest adventure.

It is to be open to the Infinite
and hence infinite possibilities.

—**Thomas Keating**⁹

Without unscripted time,
we will never learn to hear the voice of God
because we will be too busy
with our plans and ideas.

—**Ian VanHeusen**¹⁰

I cannot imagine a better start to each day than a silent sit.

Silence is not empty. It is filled with God.

When I practice centering prayer, I respond to the invitation to sit with God (Revelation 3:21). When I center like Jesus, I say, “Not what I want, but what you want” (Mark 14:36). I sit in silence to be loved and healed by God. Silence creates a space for me to heal. The space created by silence and stillness helps me find my equilibrium, my center of gravity.

I sit in silence because it is a safe place to let go of my anger—and my guilt for this anger. I sit in silence to let go of jealousy, which is an obstacle to the release of my God-given potential. I sit in silence to let the Creator create through me, to let go and trust God. I sit in silence because I love God. I sit in silence to enter a journey that God and I travel together. Silence teaches me how to live.

Silence is not often thought of as a teacher. Most often our society refers to silence as “dead time.” What, if anything, can be special about silence? This is where a transformation has taken place in my life. I have come to see how precious silence is, how silence is God’s first language. As Thomas Keating and a number other mystics before and since have stated, “Silence

is God's first language and everything else is a poor translation."¹¹

Words do not always need to be said. In contemplative prayer we float in the ocean of God. You can't sink because God will hold you. Thomas Keating wrote, "Contemplative prayer is the world in which God can do anything." Our job is to enter and see what happens. We maintain a "beginner's mind"—an openness that allows all our expectations to drop away. As Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki wrote: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the experts mind there are few."¹²

The heart of centering prayer is "consent"—consent to the presence and action of God in our lives. That is it! We do not need to make it complicated. Like the myriad contemplatives before us, we open to the presence of God in silence. We let God do the work. When we center, we let God take action within (Luke 17:21). If we open to God, God will become present, and when ready, God will act within. And we will take this action into our non-centering times of the day.

In a radio interview, Amos Smith mentioned that he has chosen his well and will dig there (as opposed to digging in several wells [traditions]). I feel the same way. I have chosen my well. It is centering prayer, and here I will dig. The silence

of centering prayer is not escape from this world but rather prepares me to engage and fully live in this world. The deep well of centering prayer provides a foundation, which gives me the stability and solidity to carry out my life mission.

A Personal and Unique Journey

Centering prayer is a personal and unique journey. We each start where we are and enter the Mystery. When we center, we let go of all preconceived notions. We let God be God. We cannot define God; when we try to do so, we end up with something dead and unhealthy, an idol (Exodus 20:4)! We can only open to God.

We best understand God when we try not to understand God. This goes back to having a beginner's mind. We maintain a posture of openness. We let go and admit that we don't know. We simply trust. We leave our "small mind" and enter the "larger mind." We die to our self. Cynthia Bourgeault wrote, "Dying to self means being willing to let go of what I want (or think I want) in order to create space for God to direct, lead, and guide me into a truer way of being."¹³ We die to what the world tells us we need. When I practice centering prayer I move from "let go" to "let be." I let myself "be" with God.

Love is a word that is tossed around a lot in our society. Mystics of old, like Maximos the Confessor, saw the Love experienced in prayer as the highest Love—as a holy state of the soul, which values knowledge of God above all created things. We can't remain in this Love as long as we are attached to anything worldly.¹⁴ I must let go if I want to behold this Love. I let go of all things that engage my senses: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, in order to open myself to God who is ultimately beyond the senses.

The hope of contemplatives, often realized in the lives of saints both ancient and post-modern, is that just as meditation has transformed us, it will transform our society. This is why we show up every day. Centering prayer is the foundation, the context, for everything we do. Centering prayer is powerful. It changes us. The change in us gives birth to change in the world. We could not keep the revitalization of our souls to ourselves if we wanted to. We have to do something with the new found vigor. In God's time, what has transformed us cannot help but transform our relationships.

Centering prayer is powerful, but it is not a sprint. It's a marathon. If we are faithful to our practice, our practice will be faithful to us. Our work is to show up each day—to show up two to three times per day, in fact—and sit with

the Mystery we call God. Our job is to sit with God and let God work in us. Each time we sit is another opportunity for God in Christ to take action within us. God will loosen our minds and keep the doors of our minds open.

When people try centering prayer for the first time, I encourage them to simply pray daily as long as they can for thirty consecutive days, and mark it on the calendar. Sits will be five minutes some days and others ten. The point is to simply begin where you are and do as much as you can. Silence is hard to get used to. Give yourself time.

As our bodies need rest, our minds need solitude and stillness. Our minds need to relax, to drop into our hearts and rest with God who is within. It is a pilgrimage from our mind to heart.

My First Sit

On workdays, my first centering-prayer sit is at 5:45 a.m. I always feel some anxiety after I wake. Then I retreat to the basement, light a candle, and sit on a couch. It wakes me up. The anxiety fades. It fills me with interior peace and energizes me for the day.

I use the Contemplative Outreach phone app.¹⁵ The timer is set for twenty minutes. I read the opening prayer. I have selected, “Open my heart

to Your love.” That is all I want to do. I want to forget me and open my heart to God’s love.

During centering prayer, I begin by detaching from my thoughts and emotions. In my mind I silently say, “I let them go to You.” I think about my upcoming day. I think about what worries me and makes me anxious. I think about areas where I need mental and physical healing. I think about others who I am worried about. I think about my anger, frustration, hurt. As the thoughts arise I let them all go to God. This process heals my mental, physical, and spiritual being.

I might go through my “let-go” process for about one minute. Then I am done. If I have more thoughts after that, I mentally visualize my sacred icon as my intention to open to God’s presence and action within. I internally visualize the icon for no more than one second. (I will say more about the icon later.)

My goal then is to forget me, to let go. My goal is to sit in the presence of Mystery—to remove barriers to God. My goal is to let God gaze directly on me. The only way God can do this is if I let go of me and my baggage.

Anthony de Mello wrote,

Words cannot give you reality. They only point, they only indicate. You use them as

pointers to get to reality. But once you get there, your concepts are useless. A Hindu priest once had a dispute with a philosopher who claimed that the final barrier to God was the word “God,” the concept of God.¹⁶

Words can get me started but I must let go of them if I want to find God, or more precisely let God find me. I am in a posture of openness and consent to the action of God. As soon as I have any thoughts, I let them go. I enter the spaces between my thoughts. Here God in Christ finds me.

God is not my thoughts. God is beyond my thoughts. My thoughts only limit God. Many mystics have exclaimed in one form or another that the most profound knowledge of God is to know God as unknowable.¹⁷ I enter centering prayer with this posture of openness and unknowing. Whenever thoughts, emotions, and day planning begin, I mentally visualize my Jesus icon to bring me back. Sometimes I do not have to visualize the icon. My thoughts float away on their own.

After twenty minutes, the three consecutive tones of the closing bell ring. When the third and final bell has rung and there is silence, my sit is over. I know I did not fall asleep. I describe it as a place I go. I have let go. I do not feel anything. It is a vacuum. I have merged or fallen into some-

thing larger than me. When the closing bell rings I re-emerge from this place that I will call Divine Union. I now feel joy and peace. I am grounded and excited to begin my day.

Letting go during centering prayer is meant to continue the rest of your day. What do I mean by this? I mean we should never hold on to thoughts and emotions that are not productive. They stop us from accomplishing the daily tasks that we need to complete. When I become worried, I let it go. When I become anxious, I let it go. When I become frustrated, I let it go. When I become afraid, I let it go. It is okay to acknowledge emotions but they will often stop us dead in our tracks. We need to let them go so we can move on. I realize that at times there are thoughts and emotions that we need to deal with. I do not suggest repression. I suggest that we let them go so we can move on with our day. Later in the day if we need to deal with them, we can.

When it comes to thoughts, there are two extremes. We can clutch the thought like clutching a rock (attachment)—or we can hurl the rock away from us (aversion). Centering prayer is about simply letting the rock rest in the palm of our hands, then gently tilting our hand so it drops. It is a gentle movement, void of tense reactivity.

Gently letting go is a reflex. The more we do it, the stronger the reflex becomes. At first we will hold on to an emotional tangent for a day or more. Then, with practice, the tangent only takes half the day. Then, in time, as we become more skilled at the art of letting go, we can let go of the tangent after ten minutes.

My Second Sit

Never underestimate the power of an afternoon prayer sit. Don't skip it. Even if you do not feel like it, do it anyway. A second sit refills your reservoir. It helps you finish your day.

I work in an office. In the early afternoon I stop what I do and walk to my car. It is usually anywhere between two and four p.m. It does not matter how busy I am. I need this time. My aisle mates know where I go (I have shared my practice with them). I sit in the driver's seat of my car. Dependent upon the weather, I crack the window. Here I take my second sit. I am always amazed by how productive the rest of my day is after this second sit. It refreshes me. I need it! Often my reservoir is empty or runs on reserves. It needs to be refilled. I am amazed at how much better I feel after this sit. After each sit, I experience various feelings. I am calm, at peace, excited, energized. I am ready

