***Spirit Journal* – July 2015**

**Contemplative Outreach, Chicago**

***Preview***

This month’s issue offers a profile of St. Benedict’s Abbey and its Benet Lake Retreat Center, a personal reflection on the transformative impact of Centering Prayer, a reminder about the upcoming Annual Fall Workshop in Western Springs, insights from Huston Smith, Carl Jung, the Rig Veda, and Alec Wilkinson, and a guest column reflecting on the topic of death and duty.

We hope you’ll enjoy this issue. Please use the link at the end to send your feedback.

***Regional Resource: St. Benedict’s Abbey/Benet Lake Retreat Center***

Add one or two photos from website.

Saint Benedict's Abbey is a community of Benedictine monks in a beautiful, peaceful location on Benet Lake, near the state border of Wisconsin and Illinois. The abbey serves both the Milwaukee and Chicago areas. The monks of St. Benedict’s focus on a ministry of prayer, with the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours and daily Mass. They gather six times a day to sing and offer praise to God.

Another important and major focus of the Abbey is its welcoming Benet Lake Retreat Center. Retreats at the Abbey provide an opportunity for a time of quiet and spiritual reflection. The abbey has been the site for many individuals and groups to find a path closer to God.

To quote the retreat center website:

*This monastery, founded in March, 1945, has from the beginning welcomed retreatants into its life and prayer. This "welcoming" is always shaped by the needs of those who come. For this reason, what we do has changed over these many years. However, within the change a core value remains: that we strive to love God and neighbor with all we have and are.*

*Our center is open to all who truly seek God. We welcome those who are just beginning their search as well as those who have almost arrived, including naturally, the many in between. Our common experience tells us that prayer is what most effectively connects us with God, our Ultimate Concern. It is God and God alone who qualifies all our seeking as well as our arriving and answers the question as to the meaning of life.*

*The prayer of the monks of Benet Lake is that your time here, dwelling on these "Grounds for Prayer," will be that you truly experience God. May you be so grasped!*

For more information and/or to plan a retreat, visit <http://www.benetlake.org/retreat-center/default.asp>

***Green Light to God: Centering Prayer Changes Lives***

by Pat Benson, Team Leader for Facilitators, Contemplative Outreach - Chicago

God has given us all a great gift - the gift of Centering Prayer, or Christian Meditation. This contemporary prayer of silence, firmly rooted in Christian Tradition, is a response to a call from God to sit silently and listen. To some, this may seem like a passive type of prayer, but I assure you that it is very active - and the action is by the Holy Spirit. For those who continue the practice of centering prayer, the Holy Spirit changes lives in unexpected and surprising ways. We are all unique, and God impacts each of our lives in different ways.

Personally, I have been practicing Centering Prayer for ten years. For me, it was like giving God the green light in my life. One gift of the prayer is that I know without question that the Kingdom of Heaven is not only a place we go to but also a place we may live in today. As Jesus reminds us, “The kingdom of heaven is within.” All my acts of compassion, kindness and giving mirror the image of God.

The Holy Spirit also healed me of a lifetime of emotional baggage and long-held resentments and led to reconciliation with a family member. I am able to love more, forgive more and move on with my life. Through the prayer, God has led me to like myself better and to care more about others and our environment.

Recently, I decided to find out what some others who practice Centering Prayer would say about how it has changed their lives. I would like to share some of their stories with you.

One gentleman, who has been centering for 15 years, writes:

*“Over the years, no other practice has been so helpful in moving from selfishness to selflessness, from worry to peace, from fear to courage, from sleep to awareness.”*

Another person reflects on three changes the prayer has made in his life:

*“One of the effects of Centering Prayer for me was a change in perspective with respect to religious teaching and scripture, especially the concept of Contemplative Prayer in the Gospels and the Hebrew Bible. ‘Be still and know that I am God.’ Christ went away by himself to pray. Christ instructs us to, ‘Go to your inner room’ and pray in private.*

*A second effect is the absolute knowledge of the existence of God, born not of reasoning or logical argument. I know God exists and truly is Love.*

*A third effect is realizing we are all part of God and God part of us. Knowing we are all part of God and one another comes with all the motivation needed for doing good and practicing non-violence in the world, because hurting another is hurting our relationship with God.”*

Someone new to the experience shares this:

*“After 15 months of almost daily practice of Centering Prayer, I am far more consistently aware of God's presence and love. As a result, I feel that my faith is stronger, I am less frequently anxious or angry, and more frequently generous and kind.  I feel I have taken just one step in a very positive spiritual direction, and hope to continue on this peaceful path forever.”*

Another writes:

*“The practice of centering prayer helped me find a deep well of unshakeable peace within myself.”*

Finally, a practitioner of 10 years adds:

*“Each of us has different needs and burdens. Centering Prayer is God’s divine therapy which heals us from the inside and prepares us to hear and respond to God’s will for us in this life. And all without a word being read or spoken. How awesome is that?!”*

Divine therapy, indeed! Each year Contemplative Outreach Chicago holds a one day Centering Prayer workshop—a Spirit-filled day for over 100 people to come together to share the gift of prayer and listen to some outstanding speakers. This year, October 3rd is the day, and I invite you to attend.

***Reminder: Annual Fall Workshop Set for October 3***

Contemplative Outreach Chicago’s fourth annual Fall Workshop will take place **Saturday October 3, 2015** at [St. John of the Cross](http://www.stjohnofthecross.org/) in Western Springs, Illinois. For full details on this year’s Fall Workshop and/or to register: <http://centeringprayerchicago.org/event-calendar/oct-3-2015-annual-fall-one-day-workshop/>

***Insights***

*The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder.*

* Huston Smith

*To this day, God is the name by which I designate all things which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions and change the course of my life for better or worse.*

* Carl Jung

*The truth is one, but the sages call it by different names.*

* The Rig Veda

*The psyche has a boundary past which it is not safe to travel, but people do. The quest, I think sometimes, is to live as close to it as one safely can, but I am aware that this might easily be regarded as a romantic notion. Even so, I believe that somewhere near it is where the elements of the self that are divine reside. They arrive sometimes as intimations and epiphanies after one has prepared the ground for them, or they can disrupt one’s thinking and insist on being heard.*

* Alec Wilkinson

***Guest Column: On Death and Duty***

by Steven Smith, Marshalltown Iowa

Add photo of Steven and goat.

Not long ago, I took a life.

I was born on a farm, grew up on a farm, live with and care for a little farm still. I have been fortunate to serve as minister to some little country churches. I've a heart for old farmers, I mean those who started their journeys when horsepower meant something with four legs. They have lived their lives embedded in nature, in tune with the rhythms of existence, fundamentally. They know the inevitability of death as a part of life, sometimes are the necessary instrument of it.

These old farmers...I have held their hands while they buried their spouses. I have held their hands while they buried their children. I have held their hands while they have died themselves. In my experience they die well, old farmers. There is an acceptance, no struggle, they are at peace with it. It does not lessen the sadness of those of us who remain, but we accept it. It is simply the way of being.

A herd of goats is a part of the little farm I care for myself these days. I provide them safety from predators, shelter from the elements, abundant graze and browse in season, fresh water, sea salt, good hay in winter, trim their hooves and care for them when they are ill, am midwife to their birthing, mother to orphans, scratch their heads when they ask it, am a climbing frame to their kids, walk with them to new pastures, sit with them while we ruminate. They teach me much. They share their milk with me in season. They know my voice. I know their names. They have all been born on this little farm, and I have known them their entire lives.

Alys was an old goat. I had assisted in her birth, and then in the birth of her own kids. We had argued over the years, and shared quiet moments together, and knew each others' voices. In many ways I knew her better than most of the people I work with. In the end, she was suffering, as old goats do, and could not be helped. I gave her a final treat of oats and sunflower seeds, scratched her head. And then I took her life. I wept as I buried her body in compost to give up its elements for the nourishment of this farm where she spent her entire life.

I have a duty. On this little farm a goat is allowed to be a goat. A cow is allowed to be a cow. A dog is allowed to be a dog. And I have a duty to each of them. I took Alys's life. I ended her suffering. I suffer in her stead. Whether this is selfless or selfish of me is open to debate. These questions always will be.

I have told my daughters that someday when it is my turn I would like to be composted and spread on the farm for other life to use. I doubt that will be allowed; the next best thing would be to wrap my carcass in burlap and bury me shallow and plant a burr oak on top. Then someday, my elements could shade the goats while they ruminate, and a child could climb bits of me, and maybe bits of what was once me will mingle with bits that were once Alys and together we'll be born into some amazing creature that will live its life here, or go where we have never been.

Lao Tzu said:

 To live until you die

 Is to live long enough.

Thank you for listening. Peace to you all.

***Your Turn***

Do you have a comment on any of the items in this month’s newsletter? An upcoming event you think Chicago-area contemplatives should know about? An inspirational quote you’d like to share? A book, website, podcast, or video to recommend? Please talk back and contribute by emailing the newsletter editor at jack.lloyd@earthlink.net.