

# ***Reflection: Mid-Summer Intensive and Post-Intensive Retreat***

by Al Crema / Originally published in Spirit Journal August 2015

Have you ever wondered what a Contemplative Outreach intensive and post intensive retreat is like? Have you ever considered attending one?

If you are familiar with centering prayer and have read the book *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Thomas Keating, you have some idea of Keating's contribution to the 2000-year tradition of Christian mysticism, and how he applies the understanding of modern psychology to the traditional description of the transformation process that takes place during the journey of the mystical path.

Our Chicago chapter of Contemplative Outreach recently sponsored an eight-day intensive and post intensive retreat at the Portiuncula retreat center in Frankfort, IL. I attended this retreat along with 19 others and found it to be a source of growth and transformation, true to the promise of faithful practice in centering prayer. Initially, I had felt that the event seemed a bit daunting — requiring a full week off and spending that week in silence. I hesitated for some time before making the commitment to attend, and did so because it was so conveniently located in the Chicago area, at a facility that I knew was a wonderful place to be.



Let me give you an idea of what the week is like:

Seven nights and eight days are structured with prayer and learning, with time for walks in nature and reflection. With beginning and ending activity, there are seven days spent in silence. Our centering prayer together in the group consisted of a 30 minute period of meditation, a meditative walk, then another 30 minute period of meditation. We did this three times each day. We also had two learning sessions each day, which were focused on Keating's teachings on the process of growth, with the dismantling of the "false-self system." I had felt that I knew this material quite well, having worked with it for the last 15 years, but

I was pleasantly surprised by how much seemed new and fresh based on having a focused time to spend with it and looking at it afresh from the place of my own growth stage at this present time.

We ended each day with group prayer, using lectio divina based on various well selected scripture readings. There was ample time to walk outside after meals, and plenty of nooks and crannies to settle into some reading and journal writing.

Here are some notes from my own journal and readings:

I came across an essay by Cynthia Borgeault...

Her essay brought out a point made by Gerald May in *Will and Spirit* where he differentiates between willingness and willfulness. Willingness implies a surrender of one's separateness – an entering into the deepest processes of life itself. A realization that one is a part of a cosmic process and is committed to participate in that process.

Willfulness, on the other hand, is setting oneself apart in an attempt to master, control, direct, and manipulate one's environment and existence. Willingness is saying yes to the mystery of being alive in each moment. Willfulness is saying no – or perhaps “yes, but...”

The point of the essay was to compare centering prayer to focused meditation. Centering prayer is the prayer of consent, and is defined by intention, not attention.

In thinking about this, in relation to the format of strict silence, I realize I can either be willful and attempt to master the environment and our experience of God – to achieve it by my effort of silence. This approach gives a heaviness to silence as if it is a burden. Or I can willingly accept the invitation to open my heart to a deeper perception of my being than I can have in everyday interactive living. Willingness requires that I tread lightly – not just silently.

In my view of this retreat week, the goal is not the burden of silence, but the lightness of living in an environment where the priority is the value system of not succumbing to the demands of my reactive self, and rest ever deeper in the source of being, freeing up dependence on the false self system.

From Merton...

“To say that God is simply the ‘divine Being’ might lead to a total misunderstanding, if it indicated that among all the beings that can be there is one who is superior to the others, and this one is called “divine”.... The deist God who is a mere celestial watchmaker or ‘supreme Being,’ has long since ceased to have much meaning in the world, which can get along perfectly well without such a hypothesis.

The manifestation of the “divine” therefore, is not a manifestation of any special quality but of radical being, actuality, aliveness, power, love, concern. And all this is manifested historically by the deeds that flow from the commands and missions of the “hidden one” who simply ‘is.’”

From my journal...

“When I know myself, I am in love. When I am in love, I am connected to the Other beyond time and space. When I am with you and in you, in love with you, we are one and you are present in my heart. Your particular features become as an archetype, but your presence is strong and holds me whole, if not tight, in Truth.”

I invite you to consider spending time in this more radical way of being in which I promise the invocation to silence will yield insight, growth, and love for you.