

Conscious Work as Part of the Wisdom Journey

by Alan Krema / Originally published in Spirit Journal May 2017

Is prayer a retreat for you into a separate place where you find rest and peace? If so, why do you not find peace, wholeness and harmony in your daily working life? Do you think it is impossible? Our human condition is that we seem to consist of so many parts that we lose track of the wholeness of our being. Any one of these parts can dominate our life at a given moment, so the many parts of our life take turns dominating and drive us nuts looking for wholeness. We are driven by circumstances and tend to be frenetic, obsessed with our needs, anxious, and fatigued.

The difficulties and pain we experience rattle about in our body yielding physical symptoms associated with stressful, anxious energies. Our efforts to control our lives and our circumstances are driven mostly subconsciously by our needs for esteem, affection, and control.

With experience in the practice of Centering Prayer, we acquire a means of releasing the grip that these parts of our life, (problem behaviors, difficult relationships) maintain over us. As we go through a typical day, thoughts arise spontaneously and focus our attention on a specific energy or issue. In Centering Prayer, we learn to drop the thought and release the grip it has on our attention, moving to our center, where we are a larger being than any one issue. We are connected to a larger reality and experience.

Many of us practice Centering Prayer as a means of opening up to this greater sense of being. We feel we are at least glimpsing our True Self, our divine nature. Centering Prayer becomes a place we go to for wholeness. But what if we could bring that method of releasing the dominant grip of our thoughts and needs into the ordinary activities of our daily life?

What if we could learn not to react to the energies of fear and greed that we encounter in our life's relationships? What if we could practice opening ourselves to the grace of life when we find ourselves getting ready to rage into a fear-driven diatribe about some difficult person or political news story? What if we could relocate the focus of energy and operate from the center of our being? What if Centering Prayer can be the place we come from rather than the place we go to?

In order for this to happen, we need to see the raging furies coming. I have had the experience of getting angry and bursting out with some nasty words or thoughts and not even realized this was happening. After the outburst, I think, where did that come from?

There are Wisdom teachings that lead us into a more reality-based and connected way of living. Following a wisdom path includes engaging our body in awareness and knowing, so that even the practical activities of daily life can take on the character of a spiritual practice.

One story that illustrates this is that of being a member of the leadership team for the Chicago chapter of Contemplative Outreach, which we call the circle of service. We have meetings as you can imagine that are necessary to organize and plan our activities. We gather together, about 10 of us, to talk through our upcoming activity. Inevitably, a part of the meeting gets to things more speculative. People suggest ideas about bringing the work to a more diverse group of people, reaching out in various ways to attract people. One idea stimulates another and the talk goes on and on into “what if” and blue sky wanderings. These are wonderful people who are volunteering their time and have all made significant contributions to our group.

Despite the fact that each of our meetings begins with 20 minutes of Centering Prayer, I sometimes find that I can get agitated. My thoughts are that we have discussed all these ideas before, or similar ones. We are willing to do them all but have to be practical. What can we get done in the next weeks and months ahead? The meeting goes on and time seems to drag. My mind focuses on this as a waste of time. This is not the right time for such ideas. We can have time for ideas but not now. My mind wants to control this and return us to our agenda. I am intensely focused and frustrated. My body begins to constrict itself in the gut. I notice my throat gets very tight.

As I observe this experience happening within me, I am overtaken by circumstances but at the same time observant of what seems like an addictive reaction happening to me.

I allow my training in the work of Centering Prayer to take over by moving the thoughts, dropping them into a held awareness in my chest. The thoughts are real but they take only a portion of the larger space here. They can't dominate this space. I release my body tension into the space as well. In reality, it seems as though the constriction and tightness in my throat is only a potential that alerts me to what might happen if I resist dropping and releasing this repressed energy – I might burst out in my frustration.

Then as I continue to listen from this other place, centered and spacious, I come to the sensation that not saying anything seems the best way to deal with my frustration. In allowing the words and the sensations to flow and move, they will dissipate. Indeed, the conversation turns quickly back to what we all agreed we need to work on. I have come to experience wisdom in this brief moment.

I realize that the others in the group have similar reactions during our work sessions. But they too have training similar to mine, and over some years and many meetings, our work together has come to be a communal experience of a larger and deeper space where we share connection and awareness.

Wisdom can be experienced in this way, but not possessed. Knowledge and understanding may be achieved but wisdom only can be experienced in a sensate way when I open my being to allow a flow of thoughts and sensations from all the parts of me, body and mind, into my center.

I have similar experiences in watching especially politically charged news stories. I have had this experience in confronting another individual. But how much do I allow the reactions of my mind and body to dominate? Have I learned to use the sensations and indications in my Being to transform the situation instead of bursting out or resisting in disgust?

Many of you will recognize these situations as perfect opportunities to exercise the Welcoming Prayer. They are indeed. However, seeing each situation with an awareness of the sensations I hold embodied allows me to quickly move from the thoughts and sensations into a gesture of drop and release (welcome) before I get too far down the warpath of my frustrated thinking.

We can work to train ourselves to engage our body awareness and open our heart space to our thoughts so that we can reside in and operate from the center of our being.

Awareness of our physical sensations is a method of spiritual practice. The methods are very similar to Centering Prayer, and we can look at these. We can explore what is meant by the “deeper more spacious place”. What is our higher Being? We can open ourselves to the experience of Wisdom in the moment. We can better see and live with the mind, which needs clarity, quick decision, control, and conclusions. The space of the mind is small, since it is only comfortable with the known. Our larger, deeper space is open to what is unknown, and learns something of connection.

Some of you may have participated in the wisdom work we undertook last winter, which included some movement, chanting, and Welcoming Prayer. Soon, we would like to offer a new workshop to focus on body sensation and awareness. We will practice methods that engage awareness of our body while physically working on a material task. We will explore moving our thoughts and sensations into a centered place where we can abide in them and they in us. Our True selves may seem hard to know, but we can explore our Self, engage it, feel it, and accompany it.

In the next step on this wisdom journey, we will work with a focusing technique as well as inner tasks fused with outer tasks. This is known as *Conscious Work* in the Wisdom tradition.