The Missing Piece
by Cynthia Bourgealt

Merion Friends Meeting House, Narberth, Pennsylvania. National Park Service

I learned the difference between thinking and knowing very young in life through the fortuitous but at the time distinctly uncomfortable circumstances of my early upbringing when I found myself being shoved down two diametrically opposing pathways of spiritual knowledge at the same time. My mother was a faithful Christian Scientist, and from the time I was a toddler until my eighteenth birthday I was a dutiful conscript at Christian Science Sunday School, where we memorized long metaphysical formulas demonstrating the triumph of “infinite mind” over “mortal error.” But my mother was also a strong believer in Quaker education, and somehow funds were scraped together to send me to the local Quaker school for the early years of my education. Meeting for Worship was an unvarying part of the weekly curriculum, and in our corner of southeastern Pennsylvania, that meant silent meeting for worship.

Schoolbooks closed early on Thursday afternoons as the dismissal bell rang a little before two o’clock to announce meeting for worship. The entire student body, ages five to twelve, trooped into the cavernous old meeting house, and we took our seats on simple benches, well-worn from already two centuries of continuous use. I remember gazing up at the light filtering through the clerestory window and feeling a quiet spaciousness opening up inside me. After a while, the fidgeting and restlessness would settle down and the whole room would gradually fall into a sweet and intimate silence, punctuated occasionally by someone rising to offer a small bit of scripture or a prayer. In that enfolding silence, surrounded by the presence of Quakers who’d gone before, I experienced my first taste of what you might call “wordless presence.” And I knew I could trust it.

Fast forward thirty years, to 1989. I am by now an Episcopal priest, with ten years of service under my belt. I have a Ph.D. in Medieval Literature, earned nearly a decade earlier and never put to full use, though I have done a fair bit of scholarly writing on the fourteenth-century spiritual classic The Cloud of Unknowing. I have at this point worked in a variety of parishes from Philadelphia to coastal Maine, chiefly in a teaching capacity. My parishioners are by and large well educated, verbal, and contentious. They like to argue about the creeds. I enjoy the intellectual jousts but escape whenever I can to the Benedictine monastic watering holes that have increasingly become my spiritual lifelines. I am vaguely aware that something is missing.

Little did I know that the missing piece would fall dramatically into place a few months later when I signed up on a whim for a week-long Centering Prayer Intensive retreat at St. Benedict’s Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. I was not ten minutes into my first sit
before I found myself back in that same indescribable sense of intimacy and presence. I knew I was finally home.

Photograph by McKenna Phillips

CENTERING PRAYER

Let me say just a few words here about the method of Centering Prayer since it’s actually an important part of the story. This simple, no-frills meditation method was developed in the 1970s by Fr. Keating and a small group of his fellow Benedictine Trappists to offer a Christian alternative to the Eastern meditation methods which at the time were making major inroads in the West. Like most meditation methods it aims to break the cycle of compulsive, associative thinking that usurps most of our waking consciousness. But it does this in a somewhat nontraditional way. Unlike most beginning meditation practices, which provide a simple object of focus for the attention (like following the breath or reciting a mantra), Centering Prayer provides no such focal point; it merely teaches the practitioner how to release the attention promptly when it gets tangled up in a thought. Echoing the teaching of The Cloud of Unknowing (which turned out to be Centering Prayer’s principal source), a “thought” is defined as anything that brings attention to a focal point—“as the eye of an archer is upon the target he is shooting at,” the anonymous medieval author illustrates. His instruction is to immediately release the object of attention and return to the “cloud of unknowing,” his metaphor for a more diffuse, objectless awareness which he sees as the foundational prerequisite for what he calls “the work of contemplation.” Centering Prayer provides a simple method for doing just that. For twenty minutes the practitioner sits, eyes closed, in a state of gentle receptivity. When thoughts intrude, one simply “lets them go,” typically utilizing a short, self-chosen “sacred word” as a mnemonic device to help facilitate this prompt release—again based on counsel from The Cloud of Unknowing.

It was of course more than a little serendipitous to me to see my two worlds coming back together again, as a scholar of The Cloud of Unknowing and now as a would-be practitioner along the path. When I returned to my parish in Maine, I of course started a Centering Prayer group, and it took off immediately. People were clearly excited to discover this contemplative treasure from their own Christian backyard. The most gratifying part of it for me, however, was that I began to notice that the people in my community who really took on Centering Prayer were slowly but incrementally beginning to think differently. I don’t mean simply what they thought, but how they thought. Their theology was becoming less propositional, far less argumentative. Listening deepened, issues diminished in importance. Inclusive language stopped being the deal-breaker. There seemed to be a growing willingness to simply stand together in that “cloud of unknowing” and let the Mystery reveal itself. Through Centering Prayer, we were all learning to let go of that downed electric wire of habitual subject/object-polarized thinking and make room for each other, and for God.

And the day came when we were finally ready to tackle The Cloud of Unknowing head on.

I had forestalled this encounter for as long as I could, believe it or not. You might have thought that it would be an obvious starting point, given my academic background here, but because I knew the Cloud so well, I also knew what pitfalls lay in store. If truth be told, I was still licking my wounds from a first disastrous attempt in this regard a dozen years earlier at a university parish I was then serving. We got as far as Chapter 3 before I found
myself hard up against those notoriously challenging opening instructions:

Lift up your heart unto God with a meek stirring of love, and intend by that himself and none of his goods. And to that end, be loath to think on anything but on himself so that nothing works in your mind or in your will but only himself. And to do that in yourself is to forget all the creatures that ever God made and their works so that your thoughts and your desires are not directed or stretched to any of them, either in general or in specific. But let them be, and take no notice of them.1

My theologically sophisticated parishioners were having none of it. “Forget all the creatures that God ever made?” “But aren’t we supposed to love the world? Didn’t God so love the world that he sent his only son?” “But what about ‘and God saw that it was good?’ “...sounds like more of the same world-hating, soul-denying asceticism...” “Sounds like spiritual bypassing...” “But what about the poor and marginalized? Aren’t we supposed to take notice of them?” In less than ten minutes The Cloud of Unknowing was weighed in the balance and found wanting. Never again, I vowed.

This time it was different, however. To my surprise, my Centering Prayer-trained students were actually getting it, and with relative ease. Those months of sitting on the cushion had taught them to see something different—or differently, perhaps; they could begin to crack the code. They knew now that “creature” didn’t mean a furry animal created by God; it meant the object of their attention. It meant a thought, and the instruction in Centering Prayer is “just let them go.” They had learned from practice that grabbing onto a thought simply pulls you back into the orbit of rational thinking; real contemplation lies beyond. They were beginning to grasp subtle cues that are missed when the rational mind attempts to wrap its tentacles around trans-rational phenomena. Above all, they recognized the genre they were dealing with: not a theological treatise on Christian love, but a highly sophisticated spiritual manual written in technical and perhaps even coded language, toward the attainment of a higher state of consciousness.

The Cloud of Unknowing is usually classified by scholars as one of the high exemplars of late-monastic love mysticism. Over the years of working with this text, I have come to believe that it is actually the earliest treatise on the phenomenology of consciousness in the Christian West, framed in categories strikingly compatible with the insights of Tibetan Buddhism and contemporary neurobiology. This unknown medieval author is already onto the symbiotic feedback loop between the “objectification” of attention and the illusion of a phenomenal selfhood or “I.” And he senses with precocious clarity that what the West calls contemplation and what the East calls “nondual realization” has everything to do with the stabilization of consciousness beyond the subject/object split. Once you penetrate his metaphors and allow yourself to see what he is actually saying here, it takes your breath away.

But I would never even have remotely discovered this had it not been for my own steady, incremental practice of Centering Prayer. I never had a clue about it all those years I was working with this text as a scholar. It was only after repeated confirmation on the prayer mat that grabbing a thought, no matter how seductive, would inevitably result in throwing me back into a more constricted field of awareness and the familiar mental rut tracks, that I learned to prefer, and ultimately even navigate a bit, within the “cloud” of objectivless awareness. Until this knowledge was ground-truthed in me, there was no way I could even recognize the lifeline this text was offering me....
As the Quaker Isaac Penington put it: “There is a great difference between comprehending the knowledge of things and tasting the hidden life of them.” I have tried as much as possible to do my theology on the “tasting” side of the equation.

1 The Cloud of Unknowing. Chapter 5-2 (translation from the Middle English my own).

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