

In Prison with Thomas Keating

by Judith Koock Strassman

There is really no way to describe this phenomenon – Centering Prayer in Folsom State Prison. You would have to experience it yourself. I wish with all my heart that you get the chance.

Fr. Thomas came to see for himself how his teachings were able to flower here in the harsh setting of the California prison system. Harsh setting – that’s an understatement. Folsom has been dedicated to incarceration since 1880. High, cold, stone-gray walls, rolled barbed wire, towers, guards, search lights, surveillance cameras, high powered rifles with telescopes, heavy doors of barred steel -- 4,000 men walled in with their anger, bitterness, self-loathing, and ineffable sadness.

Yet ironically, it is not unlike a monastery: individual cells, restricted access to the outside world, minimal life comforts, and unquestioned obedience to the rules. The only thing missing is the quiet. And often it is the promise of quiet that first attracts inmates to try Centering Prayer – then the tiny glimmer of hope that a loving God is reaching out to them.

For a new inmate, when the shock hits that he really being locked up to do a significant amount of time behind these walls, the feelings of disbelief and panic are overwhelming. Just getting used to the regimen, the severe restriction on one’s ability to complain or to say anything about anything, the level of unrelenting noise. Just getting used to being locked in with another man in a 4x8 cell designed for one, with zero personal space, zero privacy. Just getting used to the endless rules and their strict enforcement - the written rules of the system and, even more critical, the unwritten rules of the yard. Infractions bring swift and painful punishment. The prison world is so alien that new inmates, called “fish”, are put into a separate prison bloc until they learn to adjust.

Prison has nothing to do with rehabilitation. A man who realizes he must change his life has almost no options here. The few rehab programs offered are booked solid, their waiting lists jammed. That leaves only self-help – but how? What method? Most guys just settle in and grind out their time – time that is black, endless, unrelieved monotony. When they are released, nothing about them has changed. And in a flash, something happens they swore never would: they are back in prison again, serving another lengthy sentence.

There is no way that Centering Prayer should show up here. It is impossible.

Inconceivable. But it has happened – is happening. Four hundred men are doing their daily practice in Folsom Prison.

It began with individual men, searching on their own for relief, trying different forms of meditation and practicing alone in their cells. One man, serving a life sentence, found a quiet room in the loft of the chapel, a rare commodity. He used it as his place of meditation. Another lifer happened to walk in on him one day, asked what he was doing, and they began meditating together. Other men began to filter in.

Then, from the outside, came Mike Kelley who had been a volunteer for prisons for a few years. His spiritual advisor had given him Fr Keating's book *Open Mind, Open Heart* and, after a time of solo Centering Prayer, Mike began looking for a group to center with. Brain storm! Why not form a centering group in prison where the chance of stable membership was guaranteed.

It takes forever to get permission for space, clearance, and proper documentation to get through the system. But finally, there was Mike, meeting in the upstairs room of the chapel, teaching the small group of lifers Fr. Thomas' guidelines. Would it be accepted? Would it take? Each man had his own belief system – Sufi, Christian Scientist, non-Christian – and his own preferred mode of meditation. They called a meeting to decide – and voted unanimously that Centering Prayer was the one method most compatible with their diversity.

It did take. The men, now calling themselves “The Contemplative Fellowship”, began to meet for Centering Prayer on Friday evenings. Mike brought in Fr. Thomas' videos and books. As far as he figured, it was set. They could just meet like that from then on.

But Spirit had other ideas. The group began to grow.

Amazingly, it was the prison setting itself that fused and fueled the burgeoning fellowship. This is not easy to explain – prison life is so condensed, so concentrated – physically and psychically. A man has so much time to think, to think about what he reads, about what he's heard, to discuss these ideas in close and frequent conversation with other minds he will know/live with for the foreseeable future. A visitor from the outside is stunned to find that such deep and thoughtful minds reside here. And too, because it is impossible to shut out or ignore the strident noise that is constant – often obscene and vicious yelling – he learns not to contend with it but to make it integral to his practice. This takes centering deeper. And because during his lifetime, he has seen every con, heard every hype, run every game – and here, for the first time in his life, he has found what is true, real, and unassailable. This makes his practice of Centering Prayer something like ferocious. Certainly uncompromising.

When Centering is this deep, the healing that results borders on revolutionary. This

by their own admission. When they speak of what's happened to them since beginning their practice, it's in an awed voice – how the furious flood of hateful and revengeful thoughts has subsided, how they've begun to lengthen the fuse on their anger, how for first time they have accessed an inner quiet, and a peace they never knew possible. How, when they begin to look back objectively on their lives, they can see how they got here. And how they've come to feel that they belong to a brotherhood, a fellowship where, through love, they are healing one another.

These members of the Contemplative Fellowship stand out in the prison setting. Their attitude of peace, their smiling faces cause fellow inmates to wonder, to watch, and finally to ask, "What's going on with you, man?" "Come to the chapel and find out." The group was growing.

It was at a critical point. In prison, the code that governs inmate to inmate relations is as rigid as it is inhumane. In the yard, Whites don't mix with Blacks, neither mixes with Hispanics who themselves are divided into four distinct gangs, each with its own rules and deadly consequences for infractions. Territory is defined, and boundaries are inviolable. Men here learn this very quickly.

But Contemplative Fellowship seemed immune to these distinctions. Everyone wanted in. And in an unprecedented gathering of the gang leaders, held in the chapel, the Fellowship lifers asked that the Centering Prayer meeting on Friday nights be ruled neutral turf, allowing anyone in who wanted in. The gang leaders said yes.

On Friday evenings, in the chapel in Folsom, sit a circle of men of every race, religion and background. Their eyes are closed (very scary for inmates to learn to do). In the five years they have been meeting, there has never been an incident.

And Mike was watching this happen – the inmates taking the program as their own, taking responsibility for teaching it to the others, growing it – and he thought: Fr. Thomas Keating should know about this. He contacted him, describing what had happened. And Fr. Thomas came to see for himself what Spirit was creating.

They were trying to contain their excitement about his coming. A lesson you learn very quickly behind those walls is never to get your hopes up. There are so few things to look forward to – if you've let your hopes get too high and the event is canceled, it is devastating. Their biggest worry was that there would be a lock-down, which can happen in a flash. In this powder keg setting, when a fight breaks out in the yard, not only are the offenders locked up, but every inmate is confined to his cell and all events are canceled.

But there was no lock-down. Fr. Thomas was allowed to visit. It was wonderful experiencing the sweet gentleness that he brought into that circle of men. (Although they had seen his videos, you could see they were surprised at how tall he was.) And they met him with a depth of consciousness and gentleness of their own that I truly

believe took him aback. Every man wanted to talk to him; each waited patiently (another lesson from prison.) They were eager to tell him of the radical changes in their lives, of who they had become. They wanted to tell him that the healing of Centering Prayer had not only touched them here in prison but was touching and healing their families as well, healing relations with their wives, sons, daughters, and parents. They wanted to tell him that they had heard from members of the Fellowship who had been released, who were Centering on the outside, and who were not coming back, not trapped in the revolving door that returned 80% back to prison. They wanted to say that they felt the Contemplative Fellowship has grown so powerful that it had drawn Thomas to visit them, just as it had drawn each of them to it.

Fr. Thomas sat in their circle, in a big arm chair, telling them that we are all in prison, and the unloading of the unconscious, through Spirit's grace, brings us to a Father so loving, so forgiving, so unlike earthly fathers, that the far-flung, disparate parts of us can be reconciled and brought to wholeness. Nothing outside Folsom's walls could bring them this kind of peace. They knew exactly what he meant. And he invited them (this is so typical of him) to write to him personally. He would try to answer each letter or see to it that each was answered. The lights were dimmed, the little votive candle shone in the center, and Fr. Thomas led us into that evening's meditation.

They still speak of his visit – of Fr. Keating coming to see them inside Folsom State Prison.

For more information, visit

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