

THE SHADOW AND CENTERING PRAYER

INTRODUCTION

Kerwyn has told his story of how Shadow emerged in his life, how he recognised it, how it influenced his unfolding life story. He has done this brilliantly, humourously and poetically as only he can.

He referred to the Wednesday morning meeting with Peter and myself. This was a fascinating experience. Never have I seen Shadow so clearly revealed. Kerwyn brought out his arsenal of defences and used his powerful mind in an attempt to avoid what he needed above all else to do. That he was finally able to turn and face his Shadow is evidence of his courage. It is not easy to face the Shadow.

My task is to develop some of the concepts and to point to the effects of Centering Prayer on Shadow.

WHAT IS SHADOW?

What is Shadow? Shadow is all that we repress into the unconscious because it is not acceptable to the significant people in our lives. Our first drive is to survive. We will do whatever is necessary in order to meet our survival needs. Babies and small children cannot survive without the care of their parents or primary caregivers. As children, we learn what will win the response of the powerful adults in our lives and what will not. We cultivate those attitudes and behaviours that win the attention of these powerful adults and we bury those that do not. As a result of this, we create a split within our selves. We develop the Persona, or part of ourselves that is acceptable to others, and we show this part; and we hide the part that we think unacceptable, and we bury this in the unconscious. We thus create a divided self. For us to come to a sense of wholeness we have to recognise and integrate these two parts of the personality.

The parts that we reject and push into the unconscious become the Shadow self. And because these parts are not developed and expressed, because the rough edges are not smoothed, they tend to remain primitive, crude, unrefined. From the unconscious, they can drive behaviour. They can also surface seemingly inexplicably in ways alien to the outer self or Persona.

Take, for example, a young woman I once knew. She was caught in pleasing behaviour, was the typical “nice little girl.” And since pleasing others often required that she be helpful, she had developed “the helper,” part of her personality and couldn’t do enough for others, whether this was detrimental to herself or not. The prospect that she might not please, that she might be disapproved of terrified her. Any move out of her known environment, any task that took her from the familiar, paralysed her with fear. What if she failed? What if she displeased? Anxiety about this often made her sick.

Her parents were good people but they too had been misshaped by their own experiences as children. In order to feel worthwhile themselves, it was important for them to feel loved and needed. They fostered dependency in her. They felt good when she needed them. They conveyed to her verbally and non-verbally the message that she was to please them. And since they needed her to be dependent on them, when she was dependent, they let her know how pleased they were. They kept her close to home, tied her to their apron strings. The “Please Me” message kept her stuck, her life enmeshed in theirs. She did not develop a sense of her distinct individuality. She was terrified to be on her own, to take responsibility for her life.

There were no major collapses in the first half of her life. Mummy and daddy loved her and she loved them. And all was well – or so it seemed. But then the challenges of life came: the challenge to leave her comfort zone and to accept promotion on the job; the challenge of intimate relationship; the challenge to move into the unknown; she was unseated. On the one hand she wanted the opportunities that

change brought; wanted the intimacy of close relationships, wanted the income and status of promotion on the job and yet fear paralyzed her. The very thought that she might fail and displease others, especially her parents, overwhelmed her. There was crisis after crisis. Sometimes she dulled the pain of the divided self with alcohol. At other times the usual tranquillisers were prescribed. These gave temporary relief, steadied her until the next crisis, when the process began again.

There were occasional glimpses of the Shadow in the cutting remark, in the occasional flare of irritability, in the rare appearance of the rebel. But more often than not all of this was hidden from consciousness and the “nice girl” prevailed.

What she needed was what she had effectively buried in the unconscious. She needed her Shadow to come into the light of day to balance her. She needed to free her aggressive energies so that she could be assertive, make claims for herself and not just be the “nice girl” pleasing others. Above all she needed her aggressive energies so that she could claim her independence, an adult self distinct from her parents; an adult self willing to carve a place for herself in the world and to forge her own relationships. She needed to take responsibility for her life. She needed to be freed from the prison of “Please Me” and to be willing to risk disapproval. The big challenge for all of us is to balance the polar opposites within ourselves.

She could not achieve this balance until she was able to recognise her Shadow, the opposite personality within her, accept it and live with the tension of the opposites within. When she did, life became more harmonious and the future opened up with promise.

Be wary of the all perfect person. The person who seems to have it all together on the outside is often in chaos within. The person of perfect order on the outside where everything is spotless and the emphasis is on perfection has a polar opposite within that is far from orderly and probably has a beast on a leash waiting to break loose. Often this opposite other, this Shadow self buried in the unconscious

reveals itself in dreams. The brighter the Persona, the more terrifying the dreams!

The Shadow buried in the dark dungeon of the unconscious, rejected and denied can become an enemy and play havoc with our lives. The Shadow brought into the light of day can become a much needed friend that brings balance and harmony to our lives. Which it will be for each of us, is within our choice.

We all have a Shadow. Don't fool yourself into thinking you are the exception and you are free from Shadow. You are not! We don't escape the Shadow personality. It is within us all – whether we see it or not, acknowledge it or not. We can escape it no more than we can escape our shadow cast by the sun.

Try this experiment. Stand in the sunlight at different times in the day and look for your shadow. You will see it constantly changing position. At times it is in front of you, at other times beside you – on one side of you or the other - and at others again it is behind you. It is always there. Interestingly enough, it is only when the sun is directly overhead and you stand, as it were, in direct alignment with the sun that the shadow disappears, seemingly beneath your feet – at one with you. Try the experiment. I have. It can be fun. It can also bring insight. What is it to be in alignment with the Sun – Source of light, of life and of love.

Visualization Exercise

Let us try this now in a spirit of fun. Call upon your imagination. You all have imagination. Imagine yourself standing in the sunlight. It might help you to close your eyes and center yourself as you do this. A few deep breaths help you to center.

Now imagine it is midday. The sun is directly overhead. Look towards your feet and you will see your shadow disappearing under your feet – integrated into you, at one with you. Align yourself with

the sun. Experience the sense of alignment in your body, your feelings, your mind. What is it like for you to feel aligned, to feel whole, to feel the divisions within you coming together in harmonious relationship? “Let Go” to this experience of wholeness and harmony as the good and the bad, the positive and negative come together. Experience what it is like to be at one with yourself. Experience a sense of wholeness.

When you are ready slowly, gently open your eyes and as you do so bring with you into the external environment the sense of wholeness.

HOW TO RECOGNISE SHADOW

Slips of the tongue and of behaviour

How do we recognise our Shadow? The Shadow personality, hidden in our unconscious, is not as readily visible as our shadow cast by the sun. Meeting our Shadow requires our attentiveness. It is so easy to miss it and yet we can sometimes “catch” it in slips of the tongue.

I am sure that like myself, you have asked yourself in amazement or terror, – How could I have said this? I don’t know what came over me.” “How could I have done that?” When we say, “I don’t know what came over me...” we can be pretty sure that Shadow is at work.

Or a friend might act in a seemingly bizarre manner. You say to yourself, “I wonder what got into her! This is completely out of character!” - Shadow again. What seems opposite to the customary Persona is invariably Shadow. If we are aware, we see it. If we are not aware, it remains outside our consciousness. Sometimes we can mirror it to each other but we can do this only if we are long term and trustworthy friends. Otherwise self protective denial rushes in.

Projection

But perhaps the way that the Shadow most reveals itself is through projection. We see the Shadow mostly indirectly, in the distasteful traits and actions of other people out there where it is safe to observe

them. The things that disturb us most in others are the things we dislike most in ourselves and we deny their very existence. They remain unrecognised and un-owned. “When we react intensely to a quality in an individual or group – such as laziness or stupidity, sensuality or spirituality – and our reaction overtakes us with great loathing or admiration, this may be our shadow showing.”¹

What we deny in ourselves, we project on to the other person in an unconscious effort to banish it from ourselves. To the extent that we have to be right and good, he, she, or they, become the carriers of all the negatives and all the evil which we fail to acknowledge within ourselves.

I remember being part of an organisation many years ago when one of those in a leadership role would often say that he was a simple man, uninterested in power; he wanted only to serve. Again and again in different ways and on different occasions he would voice this theme. It sounded good but then... again and again he would proclaim that those working with him were out for power. This, that and the other person, wanted power. They were fighting for power, or so he lamented. What remained unsaid but was clear to all, was his fear that others would take his power from him; that he would have no power. He was blind to, what was obvious to everyone else, his own hunger for power, his need to be considered important; his desire to be in charge, to be adulated, to be served. This is the irony with projection - everyone sees it - except oneself!

It is important to note that we project on those who have a hook for our projection. There will be at least some element of the projection in the other person. If I project my desire for power on you and it sticks, it is pretty certain that you have some desire for power, however little this might be.

¹ *Introduction: The Shadow Side of Everyday Life p. xviii in Meeting the Shadow Ed. Connie Zweig & Jeremiah Abrams , G.P Putnam's Sons, N.Y. 1990*

Projection is complex and it is helpful to understand its many faces. According to Ken Wilber the contemporary philosopher/psychologist, when we project a particular emotion, we not only project it outside ourselves we also flip the direction of that emotion.

For example, in the case of the man who wanted power, to admit to himself that he wants power is unacceptable to him in view of the Persona he has developed over time and presents to others. Remember his view of himself is that he is a simple man who wants only to serve. So he denies even to himself that he wants power, dissociates from it, represses it and projects it on to others. "Those who are working with me, they are the ones who want power." This is straight projection but this is not all. He then flips the direction of the projection from them to himself and imagines that not only do they want power but more, they want to take his power from him!

The projection will continue as will the flip in direction unless and until he can claim his projection and own that he indeed is the one who wants power. It isn't a case of anyone wanting to take power from him; it is he who wants power. And moreover he wants to take power from others!

But disowned feelings do not cease to exist, they appear as painful and neurotic symptoms often played out in ailments of one kind or another. My hatred, my anger, my envy, my greed, denied and disowned may appear in physical ills - migraine headaches, stomach troubles, back aches or else in unreasonable prejudices and phobias.

²

THE GOLD IN SHADOW

² For a full development of these ideas see Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality* Ch. 6, Integral Books, 2006

Even though today I am focussing more on the negative Shadow, it is important to recognise that the Shadow can be positive as well as negative. We are both nastier and greater than we acknowledge.

In the positive Shadow is to be found undeveloped potential, gifts and abilities of all kinds. In addition to this, in the positive Shadow is the thrust to transcendence as well as qualities that reflect the Divine Indwelling. This too needs to be freed and claimed if we are to become who we truly are.

When we see deep inner beauty or goodness in another person, we can be sure that there is some at least of this goodness and beauty in us. We wouldn't have the capacity to see it otherwise. When our admiration is awakened and we are inspired by the nobility and self sacrifice in another person, we can be sure that we share that nobility and sacrificial spirit.

Jung claims that the Shadow is 90% Gold. Not only do we repress what we think unacceptable to the powerful people in our life and the social contexts to which we belong, we also repress those aspects of ourselves that seem too good to be true – “This can't really be me! I couldn't have experienced that. I must have been dreaming or I made it up. It was a figment of my imagination.” Anything to deny that the beauty and goodness within me is for real, that this ocean of creativity is mine, that this spark of divinity which I glimpse is true. I see the goodness and beauty in you – but it can't possibly be in me!

RECOGNISING WHEN I AM PROJECTING

How do I recognise when I am projecting? If what I see in other people simply informs me, I can assume that it is more or less correct. If it strongly affects me emotionally, the chances are that it is a projection. The Shadow is always associated with intense emotion. But we have to be careful that we don't think every time we experience emotion that the Shadow is at work. Certain situations, of

necessity, arouse emotion. The indicator of Shadow is when the emotion is out of proportion to what the situation warrants.

“Know thyself.” the Delphic Oracle urges us. Not to know ourselves is to leave ourselves open to unconscious forces that can overwhelm us. It is only if we recognise the negative within ourselves, only if we recognise our capacity for evil and experience this, that we can hope to regulate and humanise it. “Know thyself.” We may not like everything we know but it is important that we accept it and learn how to integrate it. It is important too that we recognise and claim the essential goodness within. It is this inner goodness and power which enable us to contain the negative that comes our way.

But to recognise and understand the Shadow, the disowned self, it is not enough to know and understand ourselves in the NOW, we have also to know and understand our life story. We need to recall how our life unfolded over time from our earliest years; the people, events, and situations that impacted on us and the effect this had upon us - upon the way we see the world, our attitude to life, and how we come into relationship with people, with our work and with whatever happens to us. We have to know and understand the legacy handed down to us through the generations; from our parents, grandparents, great grandparents. We need to know and understand the various influences that have shaped us into the kind of person we are today.

We don't meet the Shadow in the rush and frenzy of life. “Meeting the Shadow calls for slowing the pace of life, listening to the body's cues, and allowing ourselves time to be alone in order to digest the cryptic messages from the hidden world.”³

TIMES IN THE LIFE CYCLE WHEN THE SHADOW APPEARS

Marriage

³ *The Shadow Side of Everyday Life* p. xix in *Meeting the Shadow*, ed by Connie Zweig & Jeremiah Abrams, G.P Putnam's Sons, N.Y. 1990

There are times in our lives when seemingly inexplicably the Shadow rises from the unconscious, breaks through our defences and makes itself visible.

Marriage and the Mid Years are times like these when the Shadow peeps out from behind its cover and becomes visible. The time of courting is the time of blindness. The best behaviour prevails, and in any case all is seen through rose coloured glasses. The other and the self are perfect. There are no warts; body is ideal, attitude all of love; behaviour is beyond reproach. And then...time passes, the demands of everyday life take over. In the routine of marriage, you become more at ease with each other, the defences are lowered, perfection gets nudged to the side and out steps Shadow, a stranger in the house. The emergence of Shadow rocks many a marriage.

“Whom did I marry?” You ask yourself. “Where did this stranger come from? He/she isn’t the perfect other that I wed! Something is amiss.” It isn’t. Shadow is simply crying out for acknowledgement, welcome and acceptance.

You gentlemen be aware, the gentle, accommodating lady, may well have a virago as the Shadow side of the coin. And ladies, the gentleman who is attentive to your every need, does all the gentlemanly things that women love – opens car doors, ensures that your chair is pushed in – may be a veritable controller. Remember that what is hidden in Shadow is generally the opposite of the Persona that is visible. There are two sides to every coin!

The Shadow is not necessarily bad. It is but the other face of who we are. The inclusion of Shadow makes for less of a one dimensional person. You are now less perfect but far more real! The greater complexity within you becomes visible, a richness of personality that was not apparent before, a greater sense of mystery. Relationship becomes more testing, more challenging, and at the same time, more fulfilling!

The Mid Years

Another significant time for the emergence of Shadow is during the mid years when the Persona, or acceptable self, has done its work. We've made our way successfully through the mine fields of the social world; our career is established; our need for approval and acceptance is no longer so great. Our defences loosen and shadow slips through.

As Shadow makes its entry, in fear we can bury it again or, if we are open to grace, we will find the courage to welcome this dark figure of the night, integrate it and so bring ourselves to a more balanced sense of wholeness than was possible before. For this, as for so much else in life, we need faith and courage, and hope too, that despite our fears All Will Be Well.

Robert Bly has a delightful story which is recorded in the book "Meeting the Shadow." Bly says that it is as if in the first half of our lives we put everything of which others disapprove into a sack. As the years pass, we put more and more into the sack so that as we reach the mid years we are trailing a long sack behind us. In the mid years when the awakening comes, we begin the process of emptying the sack. Bit by bit we take the contents out of the sack and we free ourselves to be who we are with our contradictions and complexity.⁴

I remember my own struggles in my mid years when the good little Sister, preoccupied with rules and regulations, preoccupied with the letter of the law, crumbled and a strange creature emerged who would no longer be confined, who questioned everything, who was ready to explore the unknown, ready to seek for deeper levels of purpose and of meaning.

⁴ *Meeting the Shadow* p.6-12, ed Connie Sweig & Jeremiah Abrams, G.P. Putnam's Sons, N.Y., 1990

The shattering of the old order can usher in a time of great unease and anxiety. The old order has passed away but the new has not yet emerged. I am now on shifting sand in No Man's Land! This can be terrifying. In fear, I can put the lid on again and repress the disowned stranger or I can welcome the disowned self, frightening as this may be. I can come to wholeness, to the truth of who I am, only as I reclaim and integrate the disowned parts of myself and bring the opposites within into harmonious relationship.

While the appearance of Shadow is generally a psychological wake up call inviting us to personality integration, it can also be a spiritual awakening inviting us to reach out to transcendence. It was both for me.

INTEGRATING THE SHADOW

How do we integrate the Shadow? The first challenge is to recognise and accept the Shadow. Only after this comes the challenge of integration.

To have the Persona and Shadow as polar opposites is to be divided and at war within yourself. To bury the Shadow again in terror is to leave yourself one sided, incomplete, with an enemy out of sight ready to engage in guerrilla warfare within you. Nor is it possible to stamp out the Shadow.

In his *Spectrum of Consciousness*, Ken Wilber reminds us of the futility of attempting to eliminate the Shadow within. He says, and I quote, "Trying to rid ourselves of negative tendencies, trying to destroy them and eliminate them, would be a fine idea – if it were possible. The problem is that it is not, the negative tendencies in ourselves to which we try to shut our eyes nevertheless remain firmly ours and return to plague us as neurotic symptoms of fear, depression and anxiety. Cut off from consciousness, they assume menacing aspects out of all proportion to their actual nature. We can tame evil only by befriending it, and we inflame it by alienating it."⁵

⁵ Ken Wilber, *Spectrum of Consciousness*, p. 196, Quest Books, 1977

So how can we befriend the Shadow? First of all, as I said earlier, we have to be aware of it, recognise it; then we have to claim it as our own not with hesitant repulsion but in a friendly, accepting manner.

Recognising the Shadow calls for immense self awareness and attentiveness if we are to pick up the cues in slips of the tongue and of behaviour; recognise the projections we make signalled by intense emotionality; if we are to notice when the direction flips from our wanting to do to others, to our thinking that others want to do to us. If we are aware and attentive, bit by bit we bring the Shadow into consciousness and, if we are willing, slowly we learn to accept the Shadow.

Gently, over time, we include the Shadow more and more into our personality, we create space for it. We accept the complexity of who we are and the many contradictions within ourselves. We own our negatives as well as our positives. We learn to say sorry when the negatives get the better of us and we cause hurt to others. We learn to get up again when we fall. We learn that we don't have always to act out of our impulses; that we have choice; that we can experience the impulse and choose how to express it; we can experience the impulse and choose not to express it at all. Gradually over time we become more truly who we truly are – not always nice but increasingly real, increasingly true.

As we re-own the Shadow, the split between the Persona and Shadow is “wholed and healed”. We extend our identity and with it our responsibility to all aspects of the psyche and not just to the impoverished Persona.

CENTERING PRAYER AND THE SHADOW

And what of Centering Prayer, does this heal the Shadow and enable us to become whole? Ironically enough Ken Wilber claims that

meditation can be a means of avoiding and thus of further burying Shadow. He adds that many seasoned meditators have lots of Shadow.⁶ I would imagine that the same can be said of many devotional practices. You and I both know people, perhaps we are among them, who follow all the rules of the church, are ardent at prayer and yet seem not to know themselves and appear to be driven by Shadow.

Is Centering Prayer any different? Keating maintains that avoidance of the Shadow is less likely to be the case with a receptive meditation practice like that of Centering Prayer, particularly, he adds, when you combine this with Centering Prayer's companion practice the Welcoming Prayer.⁷

Notice that Keating's claim re Centering Prayer is tied to the receptivity of the method. We have to follow the method – the method is one of openness and of consent. However some people do not follow the method. They use the Sacred Word like a hammer to keep out thoughts and so block the rising of the unconscious and the release of Shadow.

We build up the Shadow and we keep it in place as the result of an attitude of defensiveness. We deny, reject and repress. Centering Prayer and the Welcoming Prayer bring about a fundamental shift of attitude from defensiveness to open receptivity. Our point of reference is no longer the external environment but God Himself present in the very depth of our Being. We move towards alignment with His Will.

THE WELCOMING PRAYER

⁶ *For a development of Wilber's argument see Ken Wilber, Integral Spirituality, Ch. 6, Integral Books, 2006*

⁷ *Thomas Keating, Advanced Study Course, White Plains, N.Y., October 2007*

Those of you familiar with the Welcoming Prayer will recognise its similarity with the psychological practice of Focusing on which it is based. Focusing is an effective psychological practice which brings the emotional wounds hidden in the unconscious into consciousness and which enables us to identify and accept the emotion that is the cause of our distress.

The Welcoming Prayer will also do this and it will do more. It is important to remember that the Welcoming Prayer is not just a psychological exercise; it is a spiritual discipline directed to inner awakening. It takes the attitude of surrender and openness to the action of the Spirit from the Centering Prayer practice into daily life.

Cynthia Bourgeault explains the Welcoming Prayer method in Chapter 13 of her “Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening.”⁸ I would advise you to read this chapter carefully. She presents the method with brilliant clarity.

She identifies a three step process as follows:

1. Focus and Sink In
2. Welcome
3. Let Go

In step one, you focus on the frustration you are experiencing and feel it as a sensation in your body. Whatever the emotional upset, it is associated with a physical sensation and you deliberately choose to feel this sensation in all its intensity. You don't try to change anything. You simply stay present to what you are experiencing. This rootedness in the physical is crucial. The experience of the physical sensation prevents the tendency to dissociate and repress. Remember that Shadow is made up of what we have denied, dissociated and repressed. You want to experience the emotional

⁸ *Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, Ch. 13, Cowley Publications, Lanham, 2004*

distress, to allow it to come to the surface and into consciousness, so that you can accept and befriend it. And you do this not by bracing, tensing and closing in on yourself but by softening and opening yourself at the level of physical sensation. This is the bodily stance of surrender.

Then comes step two. Fully experiencing your upset, you welcome the emotion that is upsetting you. It is necessary to interject an important point here. If, for example, the doctor tells you that you have a terminal illness and you are overcome with anger or fear, you don't welcome the terminal illness, you welcome the anger or the fear whatever is the emotion you are experiencing. You aren't trying to get rid of anything, deny it or repress it; you are simply **remaining present to what is**. You accept it; you welcome it. And you surrender to the action of God within you.

Bourgeault warns that it is important not to rush into the third step of "Letting Go". The main work is done in the first two steps, going back and forth between focusing and welcoming, and these must not be rushed.

CENTERING PRAYER

With regard to Centering Prayer, the theoretical context recognises the power of the unconscious. The theory of the false self system with its three energy centers: survival/security, pleasure/affection/esteem, power/control, acknowledges the role of the unconscious in driving attitude and behaviour. Centering Prayer frees us from the drivenness of these centers so that we can be open to the action of the Spirit within us and enter into the process of transformation from the false or surface self to the deep self and Divine Union.

In his book *Intimacy with God*, Keating compares the effects of the method of Centering Prayer to an archaeological dig. At the beginning of the practice, what is near the surface of the unconscious is released; then as we continue the practice what is deeper and deeper surfaces. The unloading takes place gently during the regular

periods of Centering, as thoughts, feelings, memories of one kind or another, flow down the stream of consciousness. The unloading may come more dramatically during the extended hours of Centering Prayer that are at the heart of the extended silent retreats.⁹

When there is a more powerful evacuation, emotions of all kinds - rage, shame, guilt, jealousy, lust, pride; memories long forgotten, the rubbish of a life time that was rejected, denied and repressed – all come to the surface, and there is no doubt as to where ownership lies. I cannot pretend that this is not mine. It rises from within me. I own it - and I let it go. There is no denying; no dissociating but there is dis-identifying and transcending. At least this has been my experience. Is this so for you? Each of us has to look into our own practice and recognise what happens for us.

Receptivity is of the essence of the method of Centering Prayer. There is no single point of focus as in a concentrative method; instead there is open receptivity to whatever is and the more receptive the method the greater and more immediate the involvement of the unconscious. To quote Cynthia Bourgeault, “Concentrative methods, which always entail a certain degree of egoic effort, tend to retard the participation of the unconscious. Receptive methods, on the other hand, foster it, particularly in an intensive group situation...”¹⁰

And yet it would be a mistake to think of Centering Prayer merely in terms of the psychological healing of the unconscious and the development of a healthy ego, important as this is. Keating’s genius was to see in the unloading not just a psychological process, but also a deep spiritual purification - the darkness within us, the raw material of our transformation. And he links the various stages of unloading, of dryness, of darkness, that we go through with the “dark nights” as

⁹ *Thomas Keating, Intimacy with God, Ch.8, The Crossroad Publishing Company, N.Y. 1994*

¹⁰ *Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, p.92, Cowley Publications, Lanham, 2004*

described in the classical contemplative writings, for example, of John of the Cross.

Centering Prayer is, after all, prayer and it is about sanctification. Its purpose is the deep transformation of the self through self emptying and through surrender to the Divine Presence and Divine Action within.

The Shadow in psychological terms is associated with the split at the horizontal level of the personality. But there is another even more significant split and this is at the vertical level - the split between the personality or surface self and the deep or true self at the heart of which is the Divine Indwelling.

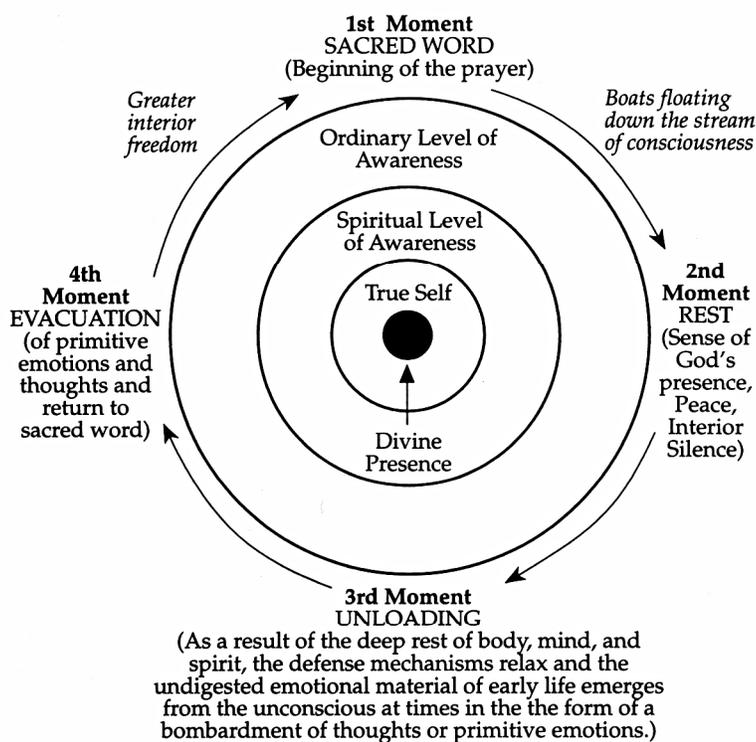
Keating by means of a graphic diagram on page 77 of *Intimacy with God*¹¹ shows, 'The Four Moments' of Centering Prayer and how these lead us through the process of transformation.

¹¹ *Thomas Keating, Intimacy with God, p77, The Crossroad Publishing Co., N.Y., 1994*

Diagram 5

THE FOUR "MOMENTS" OF CENTERING PRAYER

(Representing the psychological dynamics of several years of practice, but which can also be experienced in a single prayer period.)



Note: each cycle of the Four Moments begins at a level closer to the center (Divine Presence) because obstacles in the form of repressed emotional junk have been evacuated in the process. Thus the purification of the unconscious continues till divine union is discovered.

The first Moment is as we begin the prayer with the Sacred Word. The boats float down the stream of consciousness and when we "catch ourselves" thinking of the thoughts we return to the Sacred Word.

Then comes the Second Moment when we Rest. We have a sense of God's Presence or we sense nothing and nonetheless are at Rest. And as the defence mechanisms relax in the Rest, what we have buried in the unconscious begins to surface and we become aware of the junk within us - negative emotions from the past, deep hurts and resentments that we still harbour buried within us, primitive fears. With the awareness of these emotions and memories we are into the Third Moment – the Unloading of the Unconscious.

In The Fourth Moment, Evacuation, we “let go” of these primitive emotions and memories even as we “let go” of the needy, driven, unrecognized motivations that govern most of our untransformed human behaviour. Having done this, we return to the Sacred Word so that we are once again at the start of the cycle.

Each time we go through the cycle, Keating tells us, we are moving from the ordinary level of awareness and closer to the spiritual level of awareness, closer to the True Self, until finally God willing, we are in Divine Union. What happens as we release the junk and make the movement from the ordinary level of awareness of the surface self, to the spiritual level of awareness and to the true or deep self? Inner freedom grows; we experience the gifts and fruits of the spirit; we live the beatitudes.

But what is meant by ordinary level and spiritual level of awareness? Ordinary awareness, or egoic thinking as it is sometimes called, is the way the mind usually thinks. It is an either/or dualistic way of thinking and our sense of self is tied to that way of thinking. It makes sense of the world by dividing the field into subject and object, inside and out. It perceives through differentiation. Built into this way of thinking is the sense of being separate, set apart from the whole. As a result of this the ego experiences anxiety and scarcity. It cannot get enough praise, security, achievement to overcome the sense of incompleteness.

Deeper than this is what Keating calls spiritual awareness. Spiritual awareness, like ordinary awareness, is a way of perceiving and of being. The big difference is that whereas ordinary awareness splits the world by noting differences and drawing distinctions, spiritual awareness perceives through an intuitive grasp of the whole and an innate sense of belonging. It brings with it a sense of expansiveness. It is a radical shift of consciousness into the unified field of divine abundance; creation takes on new meaning. It is "...no longer a world of opposites. Because of our new perspective, we perceive that many seeming contradictions are really complementary at a higher level of consciousness."¹²

Spiritual Awareness brings with it the experience of the closeness of the Kingdom of God and of God's abiding Presence – "Abide in me even as I abide in you." And with this is the sense of trust that life is unfolding in accordance with God's Plan and that, despite the many hurdles, the evil and violence which surround us and are within us, "All Will Be Well.

The intention is not to eliminate ordinary awareness. We need both types of awareness if we are to function in the world. Spiritual transformation calls for an integration of these two, with ordinary awareness in alignment with and at the service of spiritual awareness, so that action flows from inside out. When we have to act in the world, we need ego strength to act but we need to be free from the sense of scarcity and preoccupation to assert and fulfil itself, so characteristic of ordinary awareness. Spiritual awareness, on the other hand, flows from divine abundance, without preoccupation with the self.

Our sense of self reflects the level of awareness from which we are operating. The more we think from ordinary awareness the more we think of ourselves as separate; and our posture is one of self-defence and self-justification. With spiritual awareness comes a sense of

¹² *Thomas Keating, The Heart of the World, p. 18 The Crossword Publishing Co., N.Y., 1999*

connection. We are at home in the Universe. We are in alignment with God and with His Will. Increasingly we trust that the power of God sustains us; that His love encompasses us; that All is Well; and All is One.

To arrive at this unified whole we have to die to self and the sense of identity that the egoic processing methods of ordinary awareness keep in place. We have to respond to Jesus' invitation to inner awakening, an awakening that means becoming intimate with our spiritual identity; our own being and the divine being become more and more mysteriously interwoven. The real Gold of the Shadow is the Divine Presence. It is to this that we are invited to surrender and this surrender transforms. We are made whole.

I would like to conclude with a quotation from Cynthia Bourgeault's *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, "Far from an act of spiritual cowardice, surrender is an act of spiritual power because it opens the heart directly to the more subtle realms of spiritual Wisdom and energy. One hands oneself over, in the poet Dante's beautiful image, into 'the love that moves the stars and the sun.' When the attitude of prompt surrender has become permanently engrained in a person while still in bodily life, that person becomes a powerful servant of humanity – a saint, in the language of the Christian West – whose very being radiates blessing and spiritual strength."¹³ May it be so for each and every one of us!

Sr. Paul D'Ornellas
Ortinola, Maracas Valley
24.10.09

¹³ *Cynthia Bourgeault, The Wisdom Way of Knowing, p. 73, Jossey-Bass, CA, 2003*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bourgeault Cynthia
The Wisdom Way of Knowing, Jossey-Bass, CA, 2003
- Bourgeault, Cynthia
Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, Cowley Publications,
Lanham, 2004
- Bourgeault Cynthia
The Wisdom Jesus, Shambala, Boston & London, 2008
- Keating, Thomas
Invitation to Love, The Continuing Publishing Co., N.Y. 1992
- Keating, Thomas
Intimacy with God, The Crossroad Publishing Co., N.Y. 1994
- Keating Thomas
The Heart of the World, The Crossword Publishing Co., N.Y., 1999
- Keating, Thomas
Advanced Study Course, White Plains, N.Y., October 2007
- O Madagain, Murchadh
Centering Prayer and the Healing of the Unconscious, Lantern Book,
N.Y., 2007

Wilber, Ken
The Spectrum of Consciousness, The Theosophical Publishing
House, Wheaton IL, 1977

Wilber, Ken
Integral Spirituality, Integral Books, Boston & London, 2006

Zweig, Connie & Abrams, Jeremiah
Meeting the Shadow, G.P. Putnam's Sons, N.Y., 1991