

The Human Condition

Contemplation and Transformation

by Thomas Keating

In 1997, Father Thomas Keating delivered the Harold M. Wit Lecture on *Living a Spiritual Life in the Contemporary Age* at Harvard Divinity School.

The Human Condition

Where are you? Why are you hiding? (p. 7)

In Christian theology, original sin is an explanation for why Adam and Eve lost their intimacy they had enjoyed with God. God used to visit them in the cool of the evening. They had an easy relationship with him. As soon as they fell into a discriminating mind by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they became self-conscious; they experience themselves not only as separate from God but also, because of their sin, as alienated from God. (p. 10-11)

The spiritual journey is more than a psychological process. It is of course primarily a process of grace. God also speaks to us through nature. The more we know about nature, the more we know about the mind of God. (p. 12)

All of us have been through the process of being born and entering this world with three essential biological needs: security and survival, power and control, affection and esteem. These three instinctual needs are all we have with which to build a program for happiness. We build a universe with ourselves at the center. Children, who are deprived of security, affection, and control needs, compensate by developing a desperate drive to find symbols of these needs in their culture. (p. 13)

The distortion of human nature becomes habitual and is supported by others who are doing the same thing—trying to find happiness where it cannot possibly be found. (p. 16)

When Jesus said “Repent” he is calling for a change in direction in which you are looking for happiness. “Repent” is an invitation to grow up and become a fully mature human being who integrates the biological needs with the rational level of consciousness. (p.17)

The contemplative journey is not a magic carpet to bliss. It is an exercise of letting go of the false self, a humbling process, because it is the only self we know. God has not promised to take away our trials, but to help us to change our attitudes toward them. (p. 20)

Contemplative prayer is a deepening of faith that moves beyond thoughts and concepts. One just listens to God, open and receptive to the divine presence in one’s inmost being as its source. One listens not with a view to hearing something, but with a view to becoming aware of the obstacles to one’s friendship with God. (p. 25)

In contemplative prayer, the rest we experience is so deep that it allows the inner defenses to relax, and the body, with its great capacity for health, says, “Let’s get rid of these emotional blocks once and for all.” Primitive emotions may explode or intolerable memories arise. For a few minutes, you feel that you would rather be in hell. But then it is over.

Contemplative prayer begins to make us aware of the divine presence within us, the source of true happiness. As soon as we begin to taste the peace that comes from regular practice of contemplative prayer, it revitalizes the whole world unreal world of demands and “shoulds,” of aversions and desires that were based on emotional programs for happiness that might have worked for children, but that are, in fact, killing us. (p. 26)

The Christian tradition of listening to sacred scripture “*Lectio Divina*” is much more than just listening to its literal meaning. It is sitting with the text in the presence of the Holy Spirit and allowing the Spirit to deepen our capacity to listen. The external word of God is designated to awaken the presence of the word of God in us. When that happens, we become, in a sense, the word of God. (p. 27)

Contemplation and the Divine Therapy

Who are you? That is the great question of the second half of the spiritual journey.

All of us come into the world as little bundles of three emotional needs: security (survival), affection (esteem), and power (control). (p. 29)

The energy we put into trying to find happiness in these emotional needs tends to increase with time.

Daily life constantly triggers events that frustrate our emotional programs for happiness. Human nature is so designed that our emotions and imagination works together. Our unconscious value systems are often challenged by some particular event of person. We then engage in intense interior dialogue as well as emotional turmoil. (p. 30)

The divine therapy is based on the realization that you know where you are and that your life is unmanageable. Spiritual awareness is designed by God to become our normal awareness. Awareness in ordinary life is like being at a movie where we identify with the characters on the screen.

Suppose that through a practice like Centering Prayer we take half an hour every day for solitude and silence, just to be with God and with ourselves (without knowing yet who that is). As a result of the deep rest and silence that come through such a practice, our emotional programs begin to be revitalized. They were designed at a time when we didn’t know the goodness and reassurance of God’s presence.

1. Security = The presence of God and there isn’t any other.
2. Divine Love = Full affirmation of who we are.
3. Interior Freedom = Letting go of our attachments and aversions, our shoulds, and the emotional programs of happiness from childhood that are incompatible with adult life.

Through a spiritual practice like centering prayer we begin to experience spiritual awareness. We live more out of self-actuating motivation rather than the domination of our habitual drives to be esteemed, to be in control, and to feel secure. We are moved toward interior freedom. We allow ourselves to rest in a silent place beyond thinking, a kind of oasis in a day of emotional turmoil. Everybody needs some solitude and silence in daily life, just to be human and creative about the way one lives. (p. 32)

Spiritual discipline is a therapy for the tyranny of the false self and for over-identification with family, nation, religion, and group. We should not have naive loyalty to a particular group that disregards injustices that need to be corrected. Sometimes for the sake of peace one sweeps serious problems under the rug instead of dealing with them in honesty and truth.

Centering Prayer is not an end in itself, but its deep rest loosens up the emotional weeds of a lifetime. When our defenses go down, up comes the dark side of the personality, the dynamics of the unconscious, and the immense emotional investment we have placed in false programs for happiness, along with the realization of how immersed we are in our particular cultural conditioning. (p. 35)

The spiritual journey requires facing the dark side of our personality and emotional investment we have made in false programs for happiness and in our particular cultural conditioning.

Rest in Centering Prayer provides us with profound healing. It requires that we allow our dark side to come to full consciousness and then to let it go and give it to God. We recognize that our ideas of happiness are not going to work, and we turn our lives over completely to God.

Primitive emotions and bombardment of thoughts are evacuated by watching them pass though our awareness without reaction. Then return to saying the sacred word or following the breath moving into deeper rest. This releases more repressed material from unconscious creating a psychic nausea and then sense of freedom when released. It is the divine therapy to address the deep levels of our attachments.

It is not yet spiritual maturity. It is just human growth into full, responsible, self-reflective consciousness. It is the process of repentance. The spiritual journey is a series of humiliations of the false self that make room for the Holy Spirit to come in and heal. Our agreement with the divine therapist is to bring us to the truth about ourselves. (p. 39)

“He who seeks only himself brings himself to ruin, whereas he who brings himself to nothing for my sake discovers who he is.” Matt 10:38. Cease to identify with the tyranny of our emotional programs for happiness and the limitations of our cultural conditioning. You aren’t angry; you just have angry feelings. The freedom to deal with feelings and to confront them with reason and faith makes us fully human.

Every movement toward the humiliation of the false self, if we accept it, is a step toward interior freedom and inner resurrection. It is the freedom not to demand of life whatever we used to feel was essential for our particular idea of happiness. (p. 41)

The ultimate abandonment of one’s role is not to have a self as a fixed point of reference; it is the freedom to manifest God through one’s own uniqueness. To be no one is to be everyone. To be no self is to be the true Self. To be nothing is to be everything. In a sense, it is to be God. For Christians, it is to be a kind of fifth Gospel: to become the word of God and manifest God rather than the false self, with its emotional programs for happiness and attachments to various roles, including the most spiritual. When you have been liberated from them all, you are in a space that is both empty of self and full of God.

If we have not experienced ourselves as unconditional love, we have more work to do, because that is who we really are. (p. 45)