Pastoral Psychol (2015) 64:803–825
DOI 10.1007/s11089-015-0657-1

A Phenomenological Investigation of Centering Prayer Using Conventional Content Analysis

Jesse Fox[1] · **Daniel Gutierrez**[2] · **Jessica Haas**[1] · **Dinesh Braganza**[1] · **Christine Berger**[3]

Published online: 20 May 2015

Abstract Centering prayer is a contemplative practice pioneered by Thomas Keating, William Menninger, and M. Basil Pennington (Pennington et al. 2002). Despite the popular appeal of centering prayer, relatively little research exists investigating its effects on practitioners from a social science perspective. This study sought to describe the lived experience of centering prayer by conducting a phenomenology of 20 centering prayer practitioners. The results of the conventional content analysis yielded 50 codes that the researchers clustered into five categories: (1) The Divine, (2) The Mystical, (3) Spiritual Development, (4) Action-Contemplation, and (5) Contemplative Life. Based upon the study's findings, future research could better understand how centering prayer affects people by including measures of practitioners' experience of God, faith development, and important demographic variables like age, religious affiliation, and socio-economic status, as well as measures assessing quality of interpersonal relationships and positive and negative affect.

Keywords Centering prayer · Meditation · Phenomenology · Conventional content analysis

✉ Jesse Fox
jfox1@loyola.edu

Jessica Haas
jhaas@loyola.edu

Dinesh Braganza
djbraganza@loyola.edu

Christine Berger
cberger@odu.edu

[1] Department of Pastoral Counseling, Loyola University Maryland, 8890 McGaw Road, Suite 380, Columbia, MD 21045, USA

[2] Department of Counseling, University of North Carolina Charlotte, 9201 University City Boulevard, College of Education Building, Suite 241, Charlotte, NC 28223, USA

[3] Counseling & Human Services, 110 Education Building, Norfolk, VA 23529, USA

Centering prayer is a method of contemplation popularized by three Trappist-Cistercian monks, Thomas Keating, William Menninger, and M. Basil Pennington (Pennington et al. 2002). The method itself is well-described in many of Keating's writings (see Keating 1994, 2002), and there exist several resources for interested meditators about how the method can be implemented in daily life (e.g., Reinenger 1998). The method is quite simple, consisting of four distinct steps to guide practitioners during silent meditation:

(1) Choose a sacred word as a symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
(2) Sitting comfortably, and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
(3) When you become aware of thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.
(4) At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes. (Keating 2002, p. 118)

Keating (2002) recommends a twice-daily dosage of centering, with a minimum of 20 min of silence for each prayer time. Examples of the sacred word practitioners may use include *Kyrie, Abba, Jesus, God, peace,* etc.

Although centering prayer enjoys a certain level of popular acclaim amongst those committed to contemplative prayer, many questions remain unanswered about this meditative path. Compared to the wealth of resources available to interested meditators who are looking for direction from spiritual masters in the centering prayer tradition, there are relatively little data available to social science researchers to answer important questions about how centering prayer functions psychologically and spiritually. There are only a handful of studies published on centering prayer, three in scholarly journals (Ferguson et al. 2010; Johnson et al. 2009; Newberg et al. 2003) and two doctoral dissertations (Kruse 2012; Kuiper 2005). These numbers suggest that centering prayer research is in a state of infancy, a fact that is more apparent when the number of centering prayer studies is compared to the number of published works researching other forms of meditation. For example, Ospina et al. (2007) reported that over 800 studies provided evidence for the therapeutic use of meditation; Sedlmeier et al. (2012) identified 595 that focused solely on the psychological effects of meditation. However, the majority of these studies investigated mindfulness meditation and transcendental meditation (Sedlmeier et al. 2012). Thus, there is a significant lack of research on devotional meditation practices such as centering prayer.

We therefore contend that there is a significant amount of work left to be done to answer pressing questions about centering prayer from a social science and data-driven perspective. For instance, when people devoutly practice centering prayer, how is it related to their experience of God? What about the spiritual journey within Christianity? How do participants experience the *dark night of the soul* that St. John of the Cross (2003) wrote about? What health benefits are there to centering prayer? Are there any noticeable changes people experience in their lives overall? This study was designed to shed light on such questions and help provide a firm foundation upon which future studies could build by capturing the phenomenology of centering prayer. A thorough understanding of how centering prayer is experienced would provide scholars a solid foundation for designing studies to identify and test the causal mechanisms of centering prayer and the benefits can be derived there from. Lastly, there is evidence accumulating that contemplative practices produce the largest psychological and spiritual gains when they are practiced within a spiritual context (Wachholtz

and Austin 2013; Wachholtz and Pargament 2005; 2008). It is therefore becoming increasingly important to understand contemplative practices as they exist within their faith origin. In line with this reasoning, we begin by providing an account of the origin of centering prayer and its most foundational concepts.

The divine at the center of being: origins and theological tenets

The origins of centering prayer stretch far back into the history of monastic Christianity, through the anonymous 14th-century mystical work *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Wolters 1978) to the 3rd or 4th century and the first Christian monks, the so-called Desert Fathers (Bourgeault 2004; Pennington et al. 2002; Ward 1975). The word "centering" was inspired by the mentoring Keating and others received through the writings of another famous Trappist-Cistercian writer and mystic, Thomas Merton (1966), who said in an often-quoted passage from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

> At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere. (p. 142)

This dense, mystical description of *the divine at the center of being* is perhaps in many ways a summary of the theological and spiritual origin of contemplative prayer, especially as it is espoused in the method of centering. Furthermore, despite its obvious ties to *prayer* in a more general sense (Ladd and Spilka 2013) simply by virtue of its name, centering prayer is not a discursive practice and instead is an aid to contemplation (Keating 2002). It is for this reason that scholars associate centering prayer with other meditative traditions that clear the practitioner's mind (e.g., Formless/Zen Meditation; Wachholtz and Austin 2013) and therefore distinguish centering prayer from other types of prayer (e.g., intercessory prayer). However, centering cannot be viewed in complete isolation from discursive practice either (Keating 2002) and instead is meant to fit into the grander scheme of *lectio divina* (Latin for "divine reading," the four components being *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*), all of which, in Merton's (1971) words, brings us to an "inner illumination by faith and by the light of wisdom, in the loving contemplation of God" (p. 45).

As is evident in Merton's (1966) words as well as Keating's teachings (1994, 2002), centering prayer resides within a complex and complicated context of theological and mystical reflection. In essence, Keating's pedagogical appeal is his ability to weave together the insights and jargon of modern psychology with Christian theology and spirituality, making accessible to laity what might otherwise be considered esoteric mysticism (Ferguson et al. 2010; Reinenger 1998). We would suggest that there are at least three key concepts emanating from Keating's works that require clarification if centering prayer is to be investigated within its

unique origin and spiritual context. These concepts are the *Divine Indwelling*, the *False-Self*, and *Divine Therapy*.

The divine indwelling

The teaching that the residence of God's spirit is within the center of the human psyche is perhaps the most fundamental element of centering prayer, and the next two concepts (the False-Self and Divine Therapy) can only be understood in light of it. A central feature of the Divine Indwelling is its coexistence with what Keating (2002) describes as the True Self, the identity of each human being as the biblical "divine image" (as in Genesis 1:27). It is the self anchored in God and expressing the divine life within the uniqueness of the individual person (Keating 1994). Keating bases his teaching about the divine indwelling upon centuries of monastic mystical theology, with the likes of St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross as standouts, back through the Cappadocian Fathers, to St. Irenaeus, and finally to the Johannine accounts (see John 17:21–23) of Jesus' expression of oneness with the Father (Reinenger 1998). The Divine Indwelling and True-Self are therefore another way of denoting the presence and action of God's spirit within the human psyche, which human beings are meant to participate in as a radiating energy of divine love. It is this presence, and one's willingness to be open to it, that is symbolized by the sacred word in centering prayer (Keating 1994, 2002). Being open to God's presence is often followed by a state of rest characterized by a sense of interior silence and peace. However, Keating suggested that this divine presence is not always experienced or acted upon due to what he calls the False-Self.

The false-self

In contrast to the True-Self, the False-Self is an identity construction that is separated from any connection to the Divine Indwelling. To develop a comprehensive description of the False-Self, Keating (2002) relies heavily upon the theological doctrine of Original Sin first set forth by St. Augustine (1950, 1952, 1954), along with Piaget's (1969) theory of cognitive development and Wilber's (1981) theory of transpersonal evolution. He suggests that within the first 8 years of human life, every person experiences within their psychological development the first four stages of transpersonal evolution (Reptilian, Typhonic, Mythic Membership and Mental Egoic [Keating 2002]). Upon reaching Mental Egoic consciousness, human beings become fully self-aware. This would be all well and good, says Keating, if it were not for the growing sense of existential alienation that accompanies each successive stage of consciousness. He argues that as we develop we also experience pain and suffering from the world in which we live in such a way that it frustrates our basic needs for security/survival, affection/esteem, and power/control. To compensate for our growing sense of fragmentation, human beings construct a False-Self composed of complex layers of stratagem to secure the resources we need to fully satisfy our innate needs, what Keating (2002) calls our "emotional programs for happiness" (pp. 135–136).

The False-Self is a problem because it projects outward what can only be found inward, in the Divine Indwelling and True-Self. Instead of securing lasting happiness, the False-Self causes afflicted emotional states that result from an unconscious fixation upon symbols of

security/survival, affection/esteem, and power/control. In other words, the human condition is fraught with a universal sickness born of an illusion of God's absence from our reality (Keating 1994, 2002; Reinenger 1998). In actual practice, when the sacred word is introduced, aspirants experience the emergence of their unconscious through afflictive emotions and thoughts—what Keating (1994, 2002) calls the unloading of the unconscious. It is this psychic unloading that is addressed by the final concept covered here, *Divine Therapy.*

Divine therapy

The False-Self, with its emotional programs for happiness, stands as a formidable foe to spiritual progress (Keating 1994, 2002). Keating (2002) contends that if the False-Self is not fully resolved, the person will remain in pre-rational states of consciousness and not experience union with God. Divine Therapy, then, is the route by which the False-Self is extinguished. Keating considers centering prayer to be a form of *ad lumen per crucem* (Latin for "to illumination through the cross," [Reinenger 1998, p. 41]), where one progressively crucifies the False-Self through committed practice. The way in which the False-Self is ultimately *put to death* takes place through a repeated cycle of four *moments* in centering prayer, the first three of which we have already covered (sacred word, rest, unloading). The final is evacuation, where the unconscious material is surrendered to the presence and action of God by returning to the sacred word. By incorporating centering prayer into one's devotional practice, Keating (2002) suggests that the False-Self is gradually weakened as the devotee grows in their experiential awareness of the Divine Indwelling and the True-Self. Therefore, the devotee is no longer compelled to act upon unconscious drives since they are progressively satisfied from within through the spirit of God.

Method

The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experience of dedicated centering prayer practitioners. To accomplish the aims of this study, we developed five central research questions. Each research question is listed here, followed by an example interview question in parentheses:

- What are the spiritual experiences of centering prayer practitioners? (How would you describe your relationship to God as a result of engaging in centering prayer?)
- What health benefits are there to practicing centering prayer? (How has your response to positive and negative life events changed after practicing centering prayer?)
- What sustains a practitioner's interest in centering prayer? (What drew you to begin practicing centering prayer?)
- How is centering prayer related to participants' experiences of the dark night of the soul? (How has centering prayer helped/hindered you during periods of spiritual dryness?)
- How have practitioners' self-perception changed after engaging in centering prayer? (Please describe your experience of the False-Self as it relates to your practice of centering prayer.)

Sample and demographics

This study utilized a purposive sample of 20 centering prayer practitioners. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, we contacted Contemplative Outreach© (an international non-profit founded by Thomas Keating to teach the practice of centering prayer), which provided us with information on regional leaders who were willing to discuss with their groups the possibility of our research team attending their local gatherings to conduct focus groups. Three groups agreed to participate, and of their members we were able to interview 20 individuals with at least 5 years of experience with centering prayer (N=20; males=8 and females=12). We also collected information on several other demographics, including age (M=64.9 years), ethnicity (Caucasian or White=13, African American or Black=4, Asian=1), sexual orientation (heterosexual=18, bisexual=1, unavailable=1), number of years practicing centering prayer (M=9.15 years), membership in a spiritual or religious sect (Episcopal=11, Roman Catholic=7, Mennonite/Episcopal=1, None=1).

Data collection and analysis

We conducted semi-structured interviews with three groups of centering prayer practitioners. Each of the interviews was conducted in a focus group format, lasted approximately one and a half hours, and was audio recorded and transcribed. We analyzed the interviews using conventional content analysis (CCA) (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Qualitative researchers use CCA to describe participants' experience of a phenomenon, and it therefore falls under the broad category of phenomenological qualitative research (see Creswell 2013). CCA is most useful when relatively little research exists about the phenomenon; it therefore uses inductive logic by refraining from imposing any categorical system of interpretation on the data (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Moreover, CCA affords researchers the ability to pose theoretical cohesion to findings that can potentially inform the direction of future research and substantiate future findings.

We conducted the CCA analysis using the guidelines as recommended by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). First, the lead researcher read through the transcribed interviews as one would read a novel, attempting to get a general feel for the content and thrust of each interview. Next, the lead researcher read through each interview again and developed codes for each identified unit of meaning. Working definitions for each code were developed and then grouped into clusters of related meaning to develop categories. Each category was also defined to arrive at a more precise understanding of its specific meaning relative to other categories. A peer reviewer audited the methodology and findings by critically reviewing the research methods, data collection, and subsequent coding for conceptual consistency and the proposed needed revisions. This particular research team member was chosen to review the analysis process because of their distanced perspective—the researcher had not conducted any focus groups or analyzed transcriptions and could therefore provide the study with the necessary verification strategy.

Threats to validity and verification strategies

A weakness of CCA is its potential to insufficiently capture the context of the phenomena under investigation and thus fail to capture important codes during analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). To ameliorate threats to validity, Creswell (2013) recommends that all

qualitative research incorporate at least two forms of verification strategies into its methodology; in the current investigation we included at least five: researcher reflexivity, investigator triangulation, data triangulation, peer-debriefing and thick-rich description.

Findings

The results of the CCA yielded 50 codes, all of which are defined in Table 1. We reanalyzed each code in context and were able to cluster all codes into five categories. The five categories we found were (a) The Divine, (b) The Mystical, (c) Spiritual Development, (d) Action-Contemplation, and (e) Contemplative Life. The results are organized in Table 1 for clarity. We describe each category and provide thick-rich descriptions with transcript evidence to clarify the meaning.

The divine

The first category*, The Divine,* we defined as "the manifestation of God in all complexity." The category captures participants' experience of God during both the actual time they spent in centering prayer as well as their experience of God outside of prayer time that they believed to be a result of their devoted practice. Their experience of *The Divine* was qualified in at least nine different ways. First, they experienced the *divine indwelling*, which participants described as a gradual progression from experiencing God as a distant and remote figure to a far more intimate companion. One participant said, "I think I've been centering about 25 years and when I first started, I was here, God was there. You know, God was up there somewhere. Gradually, He's come so that God is within me." Another aspect of *The Divine* involved the *divine omnipresence*. No matter where some participants looked, they felt the experience of God was possible everywhere. As one participant said, "I feel that my relationship with God is my relationship with my world and everyone that's in it, whether it's a stranger, a neighbor, my husband, grandchildren, etc."

Though some participants spoke to a limitless potential to experience God in everything, they also described an internal pressure to actively *search for the divine omnipresence.* As one participant stated:

> I've been fortunate for 10 to 12 years . . . to have been involved in a retreat at a Benedictine monastery. And the model of the brothers who pray all day long, it doesn't matter whether they're in formal prayer, whether in a study, whether in choir, or whether they're in work, their whole lives and that's the model and so, *for me I am searching for God trying to be present in everything*. To do that, and living outside of the monastery, of course is a lot more difficult.

Of course, it would make sense that if participants went from experiencing God as distant or remote, to experiencing God's presence within and in all of reality, that they would also describe their relationship with God by *divine intimacy*:

> I would say just a few adjectives—that I feel closer to God. I feel that it is a more intimate relationship. Obviously, whatever God's side of the relationship is I'm sure has not changed. But my side, you know, I have come closer, I have become more open.

Table 1 Conventional content analysis codes and categories with definitions

Category	Definition	Code	Definition
The divine	The manifestation of God in all complexity.	Divine Indwelling	Experiencing God within one's consciousness.
		Divine Omnipresence	Experiencing God's presence in all of reality.
		Searching for the Divine Omnipresence	The active motivation to see God in all things.
		Divine Intimacy	Feeling close to God.
		Centeredness	Being grounded in God.
		Oneness	The sense of divine union or connection with all reality.
		Divine Energy	The sense of a dynamic presence shaping one's life.
		Grace	The sense of being loved by God directly and in and through other people despite never really deserving it.
		Divine Therapy	Experiencing healing of one's psyche and spirit through the presence and action of God within.
The mystical	The unity of spiritual experience.	Mystical Experience	Visions, unitive experiences, auditory messages.
		Cosmic Christ	Apprehending the body of Christ.
		Spiritual Senses	Perceiving spiritual realities with spiritual faculties
		Fruits of the Spirit	Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control
		True-Self	Apprehending one's most essential nature.
		Surrendering	A sense of no longer feeling or possessing the need to be in control of one's destiny.
		Sense of Timelessness	The experience of suspended consciousness where time is transcended.
		Nothingness	The absence of sense stimulus when centering or going beyond conceptions or categories
		Praying Ceaselessly	The sense of praying at a spontaneous and often unconscious level.
Spiritual development	Developmental crises, stages, or aspects of one's spirituality over time.	Spiritual Development	Growth in faith over time.
		Doubt	Unsure of the process of learning centering prayer.
		Unhealthy Detachment	Avoiding reality.

Table 1 (continued)

Category	Definition	Code	Definition
		Sense of Mystery	Feeling that one is entering into new or previously unknown spiritual territory.
		Receiving Consolations	Positive spiritual reinforcement for one's prayer.
		Attachment to Consolations	The motivation to cling onto consolations.
		Detachment from Consolations	No longer motivated by the positive spiritual reinforcements from prayer.
		Experiencing Desolation	Sense of divine purification.
		Dark Night of the Soul	The sense of feeling abandoned by God or no longer able to feel God's presence.
		Darkness of Faith	Continuing to trust in God despite having little understanding or knowledge of what is to come next.
		Lack of Consolation	No longer experiencing positive feelings when praying or in the spiritual journey.
		Sense of Dependency	Feeling as though centering prayer is something needed for spiritual progress or psychological health in general.
		False-Self	Motivations for power, affection, or security and the programs for attaining happiness which they produce.
		Detachment	Refusing to be overinvolved in symbols of security, esteem, or power.
		Perceptual shift	Fundamental changes in how centering practitioners view their world.
Action-contemplation	How centering prayer is made manifest in tangible ways.	Compassion for Self	Being kind to oneself or acceptance of one's flaws or weaknesses.
		Compassion for Others	Understanding other people's perspectives and being moved to treat them in a loving manner.
		Respecting Others	Understanding the unique personhood of one's friends, family, acquaintances, or the human family in general
		Appreciating Others	Valuing the roles other people play in life and their unique qualities and gifts.
		Mindful Awareness	Being present and in the moment so that one is more apt to perceive others and self more accurately.

Table 1 (continued)

Category	Definition	Code	Definition
		Contemplative Action	A deep sense of centeredness that produces anxiety-free action.
		Anxiety	Fear of threat to one's personal well-being.
		Response to Positive Life Events	Noticeable differences in one's response to events that are beneficial to one's welfare
		Response to Negative Life Events	Noticeable differences in one's response to events that cause pain or discomfort.
		Stress-Reduction	Sense of feeling an overall decline in stress or response to events that may cause stress.
		Intimacy	A sense of being close to God or other people.
Contemplative life	The greater context of centering prayer within the lives of those individuals who are devoted to prayer.	Contemplative Community	A gathering of individuals devoted to contemplative practices that also reaches out to new contemplatives.
		Meditative Traditions	Practicing a meditative path similar to centering prayer.
		Contemplative Mentors	Individuals who are advanced in contemplative practices who offer support to novices.
		Obstacles to Prayer	Barriers to prayer that can be either internal or contextual.
		Simplicity	How simple the method of centering prayer is and how accessible it seems to be at any time and any place
		Ritual	Taking part in the greater movement of faith through liturgy, the Eucharist, or other sacramental experience that in some way connects to centering prayer.

Participants also described their experience of God as an overall sense of *centeredness.* As one participant said, "[Centering prayer] enables me to center myself and therefore when I leave this holy space, I mean I just feel . . . more enabled by God, and more in touch with God, and it just is a very, very healthy feeling."

Following closely on the heels of feeling grounded in God was the experience of *oneness*. Participants describe it as: "I think that feeling of connectedness . . . I still feel so connected with people and the world and God," and "What I have discovered in my practice is—is that I feel more connected—first of all. I started [to] feel more connected with people. Then I started [to] feel more connected with all of creation."

Embedded within some descriptions of *oneness* was what we called the *divine energy.* This experience, again, sometimes happened during prayer session (both individually and within a group) in addition to participants' everyday routine. One participant said, "It's almost like an energy matrix"; another said,

> That's something I think about when I centered too, other people who are centering . . . bringing them in into the presence . . . holding them as part of the human family. And I think is just—as a result of centering. It just feels right to be part of all the energy . . .

The next code we discovered to be in close connection to those reviewed thus far was the experience of *grace*, which was also intimately related to the experience of the *divine indwelling.* As one participant said:

> I think it's not a matter of how smart you are, how many opportunities you've had or what church you went to, what religion you belong to. It's that sense that God is with you and you belong to God and he's there and all people around you. You have a sense of it.

One important quotation about *grace*, which was an exemplar of this experience, was placed into the context of feeling the need to keep secrets from God:

> One of my ideas about God is that I don't want God to know about some secrets of my sexuality. And—and then that's like immature, I think, God. And for me, then coming to terms with . . . this is the God of the whole universe. My little sexual hang-ups are . . . not a big problem for that guy.

Grace was more than resolving a sense of guilt through prayer, however, and included the experience of God's favor in the midst of spiritual trial.

> I'm convinced the Holy Spirit doesn't really want us to succeed at centering prayer lest we chalk it up as another success. But that some things—I actually think the Spirit just throws some things at us, you know, so that we don't get too elated that we have, in fact, now we are close to union with God. I think the Holy Spirit sends us reasons to humble us.

The final code we found in this category was *divine therapy.* As participants explained, when they encountered the existential presence of God they simultaneously experienced renewal of their psychological and spiritual well-being. The healing process, as one participant described it, proceeds from within:

> It comes from the inside and not the outside. . . . One of the reasons that I retired was to get more involved in centering prayer . . . because I experienced the healing that goes on for your sense of self and the acceptance and God loving you. . . . God knows where

> you're broken and what you need, how you need to be healed. And over time . . . it's something that can't happen from the outside

When participants did experience *divine therapy*, it primarily resonated in their relationships with other people. So, if a participant felt like a broken relationship needed to be mended, they were more likely to view others with a sense of compassion. It also showed up as a resolution of their over-involvement in symbols of security/survival, affection/esteem, and power/control so that they experienced a sense of freedom from compulsive thoughts.

> I remember a time, I guess it was about 4 or 5 years ago, just being overwhelmed with worry, and waking up in the middle of the night, and a lot of anxiety. . . . I think that's what pulled me in, wanting to stop that spinning mind. And it's been a wonderful practice for me for that reason.

Another participant described it as a sense of inner cohesion, where they were more apt to trust their newfound character: "I think I trust myself more . . . have more self-confidence that if I question, I will do the thing I think is right. Whereas I spent a lot of time not listening to myself. Now I hear myself."

The mystical

The next category we identified was *The Mystical*, and by this we mean "the unity of spiritual experience," partially inspired by William James's (2003) description of mysticism in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In each code we saw a common theme of participants describing experiences of peak connection wherein they felt an especially powerful sense of continuity between themselves, God, and their world. We found nine different codes that could be categorized in such a way. In relation to the first, *mystical experience,* participants described experiences that were qualified as "visions, unitive experiences, and auditory messages." Transcript evidence included lucid and rich descriptions, as the following excerpt attests:

> When I came out of this café, the whole world was shimmering, everything was kind of vibrating, I mean—and that wasn't scary. That just felt wonderful. I felt so loved and everything that was alive, I felt part of that. The trees, grass, and it lasted until I walked up in my office and passed the receptionist and she was the most wonderful thing in the world. And then, I went back to my cubicle and it went away.

The following is a description from the same participant of a vision they once experienced:

> In the middle of the night, there was a thunder shower and there was this bolt of lightning and a big thunder. It woke me up . . . so I was awake. I know I was awake. I was sitting upright in bed and all of a sudden, I felt overtaken and I could see the whole universe spread out and I could see all the planets and all the stars but in amongst all the stars were people and I knew that these people probably had been living but there's a timelessness about it. And, I knew that these people—something told me these people were the body of Christ; that this was what Christ was now—this eternal mass. I don't know what they were doing in amongst the planets, but it made sense to me, and that just changed my whole thought.

This final example of *mystical experience* contained another code embedded within its thick, experiential description. The participant described their vision in terms of "something

told me these people were the body of Christ," and this inspired our code *The Cosmic Christ*. Besides literally seeing the body of Christ, as in a vision, others put it in more figurative terms: "I tend to see Jesus in more people than I did before. Jesus is everywhere . . . having experienced centering prayer."

Closely related to participants' descriptions of *mystical experience* was what we called the *spiritual senses*:

> Sometimes it feels like the world's been infused with the lovely smell. . . . It's something that's all around you and like any smell from time to time, you're aware of it. You know, you come into your house and all of a sudden you say, "Oh, it smells lovely," and it sort of lifts your heart in some way when you take time to think about that's there. That it's pervasive, it's there.

The participant is not, of course, talking about a physical smell. Rather, they are describing a sense of God that is *like* a wonderful odor, which made them go looking for the source of the fragrance (i.e., pursue God through centering prayer). The *spiritual senses* that participants experienced sometimes resulted in an equally profound experience of the *fruits of the spirit*. For instance, one participant said:

> I've learned in doing centering that I too am a creation of God . . . it's more of a joy . . . this is what I am too. The way I initially saw in others as so much a creation of God, I learned that I am that too.

Coming to the realization, as this participant put it, that "I too am a creation of God" could also be an example of the *true-self*. As the following participant said of their experience, the *true-self* involves much more than cognitively understanding a theological statement about personal identity: "I discover who I really am. And the language that I am a child of God becomes very real. It's not superficial, it's not Bible talk, or it's not Sunday-School talk, it becomes very real."

Thus, the experience of the *true-self* is an encounter, and, as the participant described, it solidified their understanding of a theological truth. Or, as another participant said:

> One of the images that's helped me . . . even though I find it dangerous to say—it feels like regaining Eden. This is what I was created to be, and getting rid of all those other layers brings me back to creation in a very good way.

The realization of the *true-self* was also connected to *surrendering*. This code meant to capture the experience of a trusting attitude that grew out of participants' practice of letting go of thoughts to the care of God. One participant said, "It's the letting go. I mean, it's not the—it's not the gaining of some[thing]—or needing to gain something that has been missing. It's being able to, you know, let go."

During some prayer sessions, participants described moments of peak mystical experience characterized by a *sense of timelessness*. Prayer sessions that may have lasted for several minutes seemed to pass by within matters of seconds:

> The most extraordinary [experience] has been when it goes by—an hour goes—goes by, and what seems like half a minute, when a long period of prayer goes by very quickly or when . . . I come out and I think, "Oh . . . I wasn't as invested in myself . . . for that 20 min."

Additionally, during moments of peak mystical experience, participants described what we called *nothingness*. One participant said, "When I'm centering in prayer, I don't even know if God exists," while another said, "God is distinct from me, but it's almost God is there, but nonexistent. . . . My favorite word is nothing. . . . And that's probably how I characterize it." Additionally, participants said that it was this experience of *nothingness* that was "still helpful or still restorative. . . . I feel more avail[able]—God's more available. I don't have to sit and recite prayers. I can just kind of empty myself and listen."

As participants felt a greater unity with God through centering prayer, they also experienced moments where they felt a sense of *praying without ceasing* for other people, especially when those individuals encountered significant suffering. One participant said, "It's not saying—saying a prayer for them. It's just a prayer that comes through from maybe during the day rather than just being overcome by the thought of the numbness."

Spiritual development

After we initially analyzed participants' experiences of centering prayer into codices, we noticed several codes fit into phases of their *Spiritual Development*, which included any code that described "developmental crises, stages, or aspects of one's spirituality over time." We first noticed this process during coding and defined it more simply as "growth in faith over time." An example would be:

> It's a growth in the relationship definitely, but that also reflects my own growth—spiritual growth I think, as through the process. I grew spiritually and I learned to know myself better and then I also learned to know God better.

However, upon a re-examination of the codes we saw a larger category emerge that warranted a more comprehensive definition. Thus, the process of *Spiritual Development* as a category is approximately summated in how we have arranged the codes here.

Some participants admitted that when they were first getting acquainted with centering prayer, they were initially skeptical about the practice itself, which we simply coded as *doubt*. Their *doubt* was also partly attributed to a fear of *unhealthy detachment.* One participant put it plainly: "When I first started centering, I was scared of it too. I thought it's going to cause me to become . . . more insular, less willing to do for others." Another participant said that their initial hesitation stemmed from a sense of *mystery*; they were entering into new spiritual territory. However, many of the same participants noticed an initial torrent of *receiving consolations* shortly after they first started centering: "They [consolations] have tended to be more for me in the beginning, like the first year . . . very comforting images that are strongly . . . pulling me into a place that's a very comforting," and, "I've felt . . . in terms of my emotions, very close, overwhelming goodness, overwhelming love, and kindness, and gentleness, all throughout the [time of prayer]." Still others described *receiving consolations* as being "overwhelmed with this gentle presence, this love, that it immediately kind of filters out," and the effect of the consolations was that "it just gives you a little lift."

Receiving consolations, however, sometimes resulted in an unhealthy sense of attraction to such experiences, which we coded as *attachment to consolations*. One participant in particular recounted a powerful experience of receiving great insight during a prayer session that later turned out to be insignificant beyond their initial attachment:

> Early on when I was first learning prayer, I was like, "This is great!" And so I started trying to pay attention to "messages" from God. I remember I had a spiritual director, and I said "A great thing came up to me in centering prayer!" and . . . I just thought it made a whole lot of sense . . . and the spiritual director said, "Yeah, you may just want to hold off on doing anything about that." And sure enough, it was nonsense. I don't think that was the prayer, *but it was me during the prayer when I was trying to gain something . . . from the prayer.*

Other participants conveyed close agreement and said that receiving consolations is what they initially looked for from centering prayer, but they realized later that it was not healthy to go searching for them. So, becoming aware of an *attachment to consolations* invariably led to a sense of *detachment from consolations.* As one participant described it, "I usually don't have any consolations and if I do it's like, 'Oh, well, it's nice.' So, usually it's just sort of boring but it's still—I know God is there and so, I don't—it's not a negative for me. It's just sort of the way it is now."

The receiving-attaching-detaching consolation process was sometimes accompanied by descriptions of *experiencing desolation* and the experience of the *dark night of the soul*. One participant captured these codes in a single description:

> And although I still felt this presence of God within me, I felt like things were being torn down. It was a borderline kind of condemn that I knew I was not—but it seemed to be working. Yet, I still wanted to come back there. I still wanted to . . . It was scary in many ways. It was dark.

In close association to *experiencing desolation* and the *dark night of the soul* was the experience of the *darkness of faith*. One participant described it as an indication of their spiritual progress: "This is a sharing in the crucifixion, this is the dark night, this is . . . the purification of faith. And . . . faith . . . not necessarily how you feel, is the better indicator . . . of the prayer." *Lack of consolation* is what followed for some participants. However, no longer receiving a steady flow of consolations was not viewed negatively. One participant likened it to a mature marital relationship based upon unwavering commitment:

I had consolations—unbelievable consolations. I got addicted too because it was so wonderful. I didn't want to stop centering. I just had consolations like crazy. But now there's really sort of like a marriage that's been going for 25 years. So, you . . . just want to regardless of no consolation . . .

Wanting to continue praying without immediate gratification makes more sense in light of the *sense of dependency* that one participant described: "I need it. If I don't have it, then I'm a different person. . . . If I haven't centered, there're going to be more, to me, snappy moments, short moments, judgmental moments, or less moments of joy sometimes."

It is noteworthy, as the comments above illustrate, that participants noticed a difference in their personality when they failed to pray, which we coded as an allusion to the *false-self*. Participants described their experience with the *false-self* in several instances, such as, "Without centering I become more self-centered and grumpy." Likewise, another participant said, "I felt that I was just angry a lot . . . the classic road rage . . . sometimes I would just have these episodes of rage." Still others described it primarily in terms of fear—"I remember a time, I guess it was about 4 or 5 years ago, just being overwhelmed with worry, and waking up in the middle of the night, and a lot of anxiety"—and another in terms of compulsions: "I think

one thing I do that drives a lot of people crazy is I—I always want to fix it, whatever it is, I can fix it." Another participant used particular symbols, such as, "I can't withdraw from . . . particularly money . . . it seems to be a very big symbol for me, for security."

Whereas the experience of the *false-self* was memorable for participants, they also described the experience of being released from the power of the *false-self* through *detachment.* One participant described this as "a relax[ed] attitude towards control even while there are many things I still want to go my way." Another participant talked about detachment as a redefinition of identity:

> I rarely define myself by what I do, and I used to define myself by what I did, how well I did it, what job I held, what position . . . what courses I took, that was when I was defining myself as opposed to just being who I am.

Or as another said, "a very strong kind of dis-identification with . . . being an American, with being white, with being a man . . . they form parts of my identity, but that's not who I really am."

Ultimately, participants described a vital *perceptual shift* through their centering practice, which we defined as "fundamental changes in how centering practitioners view their world." One participant eloquently encapsulated this experience in the following summary, which could also be illustrated by several small examples from other participants:

> So you changed and then everything around you changes. I mean the way you look at everything changes, the way you act changes. It just continues. It's like a cascade of events because you're continuing to grow into this and then you are broadcasting it to everything else in your presence.

Action-contemplation

Action-Contemplation captures all of the codes we identified as related to "how centering prayer is made manifest in tangible ways." First of all, participants noted a growing sense of compassion, both *compassion for self* and *compassion for others*. One participant described self-compassion as follows: "I'm able to accept myself more as I am, and not judge myself, and forgive myself," while another described *compassion for others* as:

> I think I'm becoming less critical of—of other people. When I'm driving I'm no longer offended by people who don't obey the rules and—and can say to myself, "Yeah, I hope they get home safely" rather than being angry.

Likewise, participants mentioned that they experienced moments of *respecting others*, as in "I feel that centering prayer has helped me to be more respectful of people . . . more insightful that the less you instruct and diminish the power [of] another person . . . the less you do that, the more that a person's energy and power arises." In a similar way, they also described feeling a heightened sense of *appreciating others*, as one participant said of other people, "The smartness they have, the creativity they have, the goodness they have, the quirks they have, whatever it is . . . I really enjoyed them more and actually get more out of things."

Participants sometimes mentioned, within the context of their newfound compassion, respect and appreciation, an experience of *mindful awareness*. For example, "When I center, I feel that I can be more present throughout the day to people" and "You are more aware of

putting things into categories good or bad, useful or not." One participant described *mindful awareness* as their ability to attune to others: "I can tell now when I'm not dialed into somebody and when I am dialed into somebody, and I think that happens more than I maybe realize. . . . I feel more attuned to others."

In their time outside of prayer, participants described an experience we coded as *contemplative action*. This code captured the sense of compulsion-free activity. One participant put it as, "I used to say I should volunteer and help the starving Armenians. . . . It just doesn't work that way so much anymore. I don't feel guilty in doing good. It's just the opportunity seems to pop up." Closely related to the experience of *contemplative action* was the cessation of *anxiety* itself. One participant described the freedom from a frenetic state of mind as follows: "I know one thing that's changed. I rarely really worry anymore and I don't have that constant interior conversation going on. So, I mean, I can be concerned, but it's not a frantic kind of thing."

Indeed, participants mentioned that the way their *response to negative and positive life events* was also noticeably different after practicing centering prayer. This is partly explained by the fact that some described centering prayer as a means of *stress reduction*. In essence, they described their response to stressors as a mental state that was less determined by external factors:

> When I read so often our news and so many tragic stories, some of them very close to home, deaths and young people and so forth and some are far away, and I think suddenly sometimes it helps me to not be so overcome by numbness, cynicism, or grief, but it really helps me to pray through that.

Lastly, participants described differences in the way they approached relationships with others, which we coded as *intimacy*:

> Centering helped me find out who I really am and open it up and allowed me to be open to other people. And I think, I hesitate to use the word intimate, but that described it. . . . And something that's really pretty risky—without centering prayer, I will be closed. I would not risk intimacy.

Contemplative life

Contemplative Life refers to those codes that we saw clustering under "the greater context of centering prayer within the lives of those individuals who are devoted to prayer." For instance, some participants said that the reason why they found centering prayer so appealing was because they came into contact with a *contemplative community*. Some made initial contact through groups that were advertised in churches. Others recounted experiences of going to a monastery and being drawn to practice centering through the influence of monks. Still others described the power of meeting in groups to pray. One participant noted:

> I think there's something in the gathering. . . . And if you think about it, you gather around, somebody's going to say something, a few things, but then you're going to be in silence . . . then you ring a bell and you go. You say "That's crazy!" You can be in silence anywhere. And so I just figure there's something—there must be another kind of energy.

Some participants claimed that they had also experienced other *meditative traditions* (defined as "practicing a meditative path similar to centering prayer") but found centering prayer's connection to Christianity to be a natural segue into their spiritual experience.

> I can do meditation techniques. But prayer for me is the relationship and the connection with God, that energy we're talking about. That's the important thing. So centering prayer actually allows me to still be at home in the Christian church.

Naturally, after encountering a *contemplative community*, participants also spoke about the importance of *contemplative mentors* in their developing prayer practice. Sometimes mentors were people they personally encountered, but at other times they were revered mystics: "I try to be more like . . . St. Francis who is imitating Jesus. And so by the . . . study of St. Francis and how he responded to all of those he encountered, 'others' was his favorite word, which was God's favorite word." The support they received from *contemplative community* and *contemplative mentors* also helped participants to overcome *obstacles to prayer,* such as living in a densely populated area with frequent traffic jams or caring for a sick family member:

> I don't think we should add to our litany in our life of "I could have done better" . . . or give up because I didn't do 20 min this day and I haven't done it for a week because of I had watch the grandchildren or my husband was sick or you name it. . . . That's where the support group is so helpful. When we walk in here it's the warmth and the greeting and so forth. We are all here for each other and it's that ability to return.

Moreover, participants explained that the *simplicity*, or "how simple the method of centering prayer is and how accessible it seems to be at anytime and anyplace," was something that stood out to them. It was especially helpful during times of spiritual dryness:

> It's helped me through spiritual dryness, because it's the same practice no matter what. So the practice in itself is simple, just come back to the word whenever you get engaged in anything. And . . . if I start to think about how boring, or bad, or terrible my practice is at the moment, then there's an immediate, well . . . just—gently return to the word. So the practice in itself helps.

The final code, *ritual*, was meant to capture the process by which centering prayer connected to the greater context of the participants' religious life. Several small examples are worth quoting:

- "It rounds out your prayer life nicely to add to mass, to vocal prayer with God."
- "Whatever the Eucharistic message is, you know, everything gets transformed, working on, prayed through during centered prayer time."
- "Centering prayer connects me to the ancient Christian past."
- "I was eager to come and practice centering prayer, because this puts me at home in my own tradition, in my own culture. . . . I know the stories in Christianity, I know the music, I know the art, and—and that has its tradition in—in the Christian sphere."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experience of centering prayer practitioners. In sum, we identified 50 codes and five categories detailing the phenomenology of centering prayer. We now relate our findings back to our research questions before addressing

the implications of the data. Lastly, we provide some preliminary explanation and hypotheses related to our findings.

First, we asked, "What are the spiritual experiences of centering prayer practitioners?" The answer is multidimensional. Consistent with preliminary evidence from past research (Johnson et al. 2009), participants in this study reported a heightened awareness of God's presence in their lives. They had an acute, experiential knowledge of the divine at the center of their being, which filtered out into their perception of the exterior world and the people they met. Their interior experience was characterized by grace, a gentle and non-judgmental presence that brought with it healing and a new way of living life. Sometimes it was accompanied by dramatic visions and other times by an apophatic void, but the result was the same—their sense of God's acceptance of them led to the formation of a new identity. They no longer sensed an incongruity between what they confessed and what they felt; they knew that they were God's children—that God loved them. Their new perspective led to the potential of seeing God in everything and everyone they met, even in the most unexpected ways. In essence, the spiritual experience of centering prayer can be summed up as a greater sense of connection to God, self, and all of reality.

We also asked, "What health benefits are there to practicing centering prayer?" If health can be defined in a broad sense of holistic wellness (including the spiritual, vocational, physical, emotional, and relational dimensions [see Myers and Sweeney 2008; Myers et al. 2000]), participants made several noteworthy observations. They said that their anxiety and stress all were but extinguished through their experience in centering prayer. They no longer responded to stressors in a frantic manner or felt determined by their circumstances. Furthermore, they noticed that they were more likely to experience positive emotional states. All of the observations mentioned thus far are consistent with prior research on centering prayer in particular (Ferguson et al. 2010; Kruse 2012) and meditation in general (Wachholtz and Austin 2013). It would make sense, then, that if participants experienced detachment from the usual objects of security/survival, affection/esteem, and power/control, that their affect would likewise be unconditioned by anxiety-provoking circumstances and instead be sustained by their sense of being centered in the Divine. Bingaman (2014) suggests that contemplative practices such as centering prayer have a significant influence on directing the brain's neuroplasticity to undermine one's ingrained negativity bias and predisposition to anxiety. Likewise, the participants' approach to relationships was positively affected so that they were more willing to risk intimacy and offer compassion to other people. Resolving relational angst would suggest a potential contribution of centering prayer not only to personal growth but also to positive systemic change within communities. Overall, these findings are consistent with newer intervention-based studies of compassionate caregiving using meditative passages (Oman et al. 2010), suggesting that centering prayer could be producing similar effects.

The answers to our first and second research questions provide a level of explanation to our third research question: "What sustains a practitioner's interest in centering prayer?" With so many positive effects people can experience, why would practitioners not be interested in continuing to center? After all, centering prayer requires a significant time commitment (Keating's (2002) guidelines recommend at least two 20-min prayer sessions every day), and many participants alluded to how difficult it can be to set aside time to sit in silence. The answer, then, seems to be in the connection centering prayer has to Christian spirituality and the support the participants received from other contemplatives. Since centering prayer is uniquely Christian, these Christian

participants were able to incorporate it into the larger context of their religious devotion so that it integrated naturally into the ritual they already observed. Without such an innate connection, it is questionable if centering prayer would have been an effective contemplative practice for our participants. The answer may also be that the group, which our participants regularly attend, provides encouragement through a non-judgmental acceptance of participants' trials in the spiritual journey.

In terms of the spiritual journey itself, we asked, "How is centering prayer related to participants' experiences of the dark night of the soul?" Of course, *Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross (2003) is an influential Christian book that details the process of purification in contemplative prayer whereby one ceases to be attached to thoughts and concepts of God and shifts into a more mature stage of spiritual development (Green 1991). St. John of the Cross (2003) said that all sincere contemplatives experience the dark night of the soul but that few remain devoted enough to see it resolved. In response to our research question, we would suggest that centering prayer helps sustain the practitioner's drive toward progress in the spiritual journey during periods of spiritual dryness. How it helps can probably be credited to the simplicity and effortlessness of the method. Experiencing interior spiritual trials can be discouraging, as there seems to be little sign of personal progress without the expected immediate gratification to the senses through consolations. Centering prayer anticipates this experience and provides a means of sustenance through faith. The simplicity of returning, without effort, to the sacred word whenever one is consumed by thoughts removes the need to control one's spiritual experience and instead asks one to merely accept whatever it is one experiences and trust that God can handle it. It is likely the process-structure of returning to the sacred word, resting, unloading, and evacuating (Keating 1994, 2002) that provides the kind of support needed to remain devoted to contemplation in the midst of periods of the dark night of the soul.

Lastly, we asked, "How has the practitioners' self-perception changed after engaging in centering prayer?" The answer is straightforward: Participants in this study indicated that they have become less judgmental, more compassionate toward self, and more at home in their own skin. This is consistent with Bingaman (2014), who reported on the significant effect centering prayer can have on one's ability to experience love, joy, and a spirit of non-judgement. In connection to our first research question, when centering prayer places the practitioner into experiential contact with the Divine Indwelling and the True-Self, they experience a perspective shift. This perspective shift, we would suggest, inevitably involves an acceptance of self, as some participants put it, as a child of God. Additionally, though aspects of one's identity remain intact (such as gender, race, religion), they are no longer held tightly. Instead, they are fully incorporated into the self, without determining it.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are three-fold. All qualitative research is inherently limited by the fact that its findings cannot be generalized to people who were not included in the study's sample. We fully acknowledge this and would caution readers who would try to apply the study's findings to samples without due qualifications. This study provided a window into the experience of centering prayer, but experience is always subjective without employing rigorous tools of inference (i.e., inferential statistics). Second, the study's sample was significantly

homogeneous. Participants were well-educated, mostly Caucasian, retired, wealthy, and active in one of two Christian denominations (Catholic and Episcopalian). The sample's demographics may, however, provide a guide for future research about who is typically drawn to centering prayer. Lastly, we did not ask the participants if they were daily practitioners and how long they typically practiced centering during each prayer time. Future studies, especially those studies employing quantitative analyses, should take into account the frequency of their sample's daily centering practice.

Implications for future research

Our findings and discussion suggest that there at least three avenues of future research to consider. First, it would be advantageous for researchers to first assess the quality of subjects' experience of the divine. Centering prayer appears to be an effective means of making practitioners open to genuine God-experience. However, we would also recommend that researchers take into account where participants stand in terms of faith development (e.g., Fowler 1995), as it does not appear easy to discern which comes first: Does centering prayer help practitioners advance in faith development or does faith development determine who will be drawn to practicing centering prayer? Despite claims made by experts (Wilber 2006), advancing to higher stages of consciousness has never been empirically verified with centering prayer. Likewise, it is not clear if the practitioner's age, race, religious affiliation, or income level play similar roles.

Second, centering prayer appears to fundamentally change how practitioners experience and approach their relation to self and other people. Assessing the quality of self-concept and interpersonal connection would therefore be an important variable to consider in any future investigations. Lastly, symptom reduction in anxiety, depression, and stress and the emergence of positive emotion appear to be consistent findings across studies and should be replicated in the future. However, future studies should also test hypotheses related to causal inference, as participants in this study described their experience of symptom reduction and positive affect as a byproduct of other variables (e.g., quality of participants' experience of God). Further, we suggest that future research examine the physiological effects of centering prayer to gain a better understanding of how this practice influences biological mechanisms.

Conclusion

There is an insufficient amount of research investigating centering prayer using the methods of social science. This study examined pressing questions about centering prayer and was successful in providing a sound description of its phenomenology. Our findings provided substantial responses to our five research questions and identified three areas where research can build upon the study's findings and discussion: (1) practitioners' experience of the divine in contexts of faith development and important demographics, (2) quality of interpersonal relationships, and (3) positive and negative emotional responses.

Acknowledgments Support for this research was obtained through the Loyola University Maryland Dean's Grant. The authors would also like to acknowledge Stephanie Durnford for proofreading the entire manuscript.

References

Augustine. (1950). In G. Etienne, G. G. Walsh, & D. B. Zema (Eds.), *Fathers of the church, volume 24: City of God, Books1–7*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press. http://www.ebrary.com**. Accessed 30 April 2014**.

Augustine. (1952). In G. G. Walsh & G. Monahan (Eds.), *Fathers of the church, Volume 24: City of God, Books 8–16*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press. http://www.ebrary.com**. Accessed 30 April 2014**.

Augustine. (1954). In G. G. Walsh & D. J. Honan (Eds.), *Fathers of the church, volume 24: City of God, Books 17–22*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press. http://www.ebrary.com**. Accessed 30 April 2014**.

Bingaman, K. A. (2014). *The power of neuroplasticity for pastoral and spiritual care*. Plymouth: Lexington Books.

Bourgeault, C. (2004). *Centering prayer and inner awakening*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Ferguson, J. K., Willemsen, E., & Castañeto, M. V. (2010). Centering prayer as a healing response to everyday stress: a psychological and spiritual process. *Pastoral Psychology, 59*(3), 305–329. doi:10.1007/s11089-009-0225-7.

Fowler, J. W. (1995). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. New York: Harper Collins.

Green, T. H. (1991). *Drinking from a dry well*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press.

Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*(9), 1277–1288. doi:10.1177/1049732305276687.

James, W. (2003). *The varieties of religious experience*. New York: Penguin Putman.

John of the Cross. (2003). *Dark night of the soul* (3rd ed.). Mineola: Dover.

Johnson, M., Dose, A., Pipe, T., Petersen, W., Huschka, M., Gallenberg, M., & Frost, M. (2009). Centering prayer for women receiving chemotherapy for recurrent ovarian cancer: a pilot study. *Oncology Nursing Forum, 36*(4), 421–428.

Keating, T. (1994). *Intimacy with god*. New York: Cross Road Publishing.

Keating, T. (2002). *Foundations for centering prayer and the Christian contemplative tradition*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Kruse, J. (2012). *Differential effects of centering prayer and progressive muscle relaxation as an intervention for anxiety reduction* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from Proquest. (UMI number 3529544).

Kuiper, J. K. (2005). *The experience of centering prayer: A heuristic inquiry* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from Proquest. (UMI number 3160265).

Ladd, K. L., & Spilka, B. (2013). Prayer: A review of the empirical literature. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 311–327). New York: Guilford Press.

Merton, T. (1966). *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*. Garden City: Doubleday.

Merton, T. (1971). *Contemplative prayer*. Garden City: Image Books.

Myers, J. E., & Sweeney, T. J. (2008). Wellness counseling: the evidence base for practice. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 86*(4), 482–493.

Myers, J. E., Sweeney, T. J., & Witmer, J. (2000). The wheel of wellness counseling for wellness: a holistic model for treatment planning. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 78*(3), 251–266. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6676.2000.tb01906.x.

Newberg, A., Pourdehnad, M., Alavi, A., & D'Aquili, E. G. (2003). Cerebral blood flow during meditative prayer: preliminary findings and methodological issues. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 97*(2), 625–630. doi:10.2466/PMS.97.5.625-630.

Oman, D., Thoresen, C., & Hedberg, J. (2010). Does passage meditation foster compassionate love among health professionals? A randomized trial. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture, 13*(2), 129–154. doi:10.1080/13674670903261954.

Ospina, M. B., Bond, K., Karkhaneh, M., Tjosvold, L., Vandermeer, B., Liang, Y., & Klassen, T. P. (2007). *Meditation practices for health: State of the research*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Evidence-Based Practice Center.

Pennington, M. B., Keating, T., & Clarke, T. E. (2002). *Finding grace at the center: The beginning of centering prayer*. Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing.

Piaget, J. (1969). *The psychology of the child*. New York: Basic.

Reinenger, G. (1998). The Christian contemplative tradition and centering prayer. In G. Reininger (Ed.), *Centering prayer in daily life and ministry* (pp. 26–46). New York: Continuum.

Sedlmeier, P., Eberth, J., Schwarz, M., Zimmermann, D., Haarig, F., Jaeger, S., & Krunze, S. (2012). The psychological effects of meditation: a meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 138*(6), 1139–1171. doi:10.1037/a0028168.

Wachholtz, A. B., & Austin, E. T. (2013). Contemporary spiritual meditation: Practices and outcomes. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 311–327). New York: Guilford Press.

Wachholtz, A. B., & Pargament, K. I. (2005). Is spirituality a critical ingredient of meditation? Comparing the effects of spiritual meditation, secular meditation, and relaxation on spiritual, psychological, cardiac, and pain outcomes. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 28*(4), 369–384.

Wachholtz, A. B., & Pargament, K. I. (2008). Migraines and meditation: does spirituality matter? *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 31*(4), 351–366. doi:10.1007/s10865-008-9159-2.

Ward, B. (1975). *The sayings of the desert fathers: The alphabetical collection*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications.

Wilber, K. (1981). *Up from Eden*. Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Wilber, K. (2006). *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*. Boston: Integral Books.

Wolters, C. (Ed.). (1978). *The cloud of unknowing and other works*. New York: Penguin.