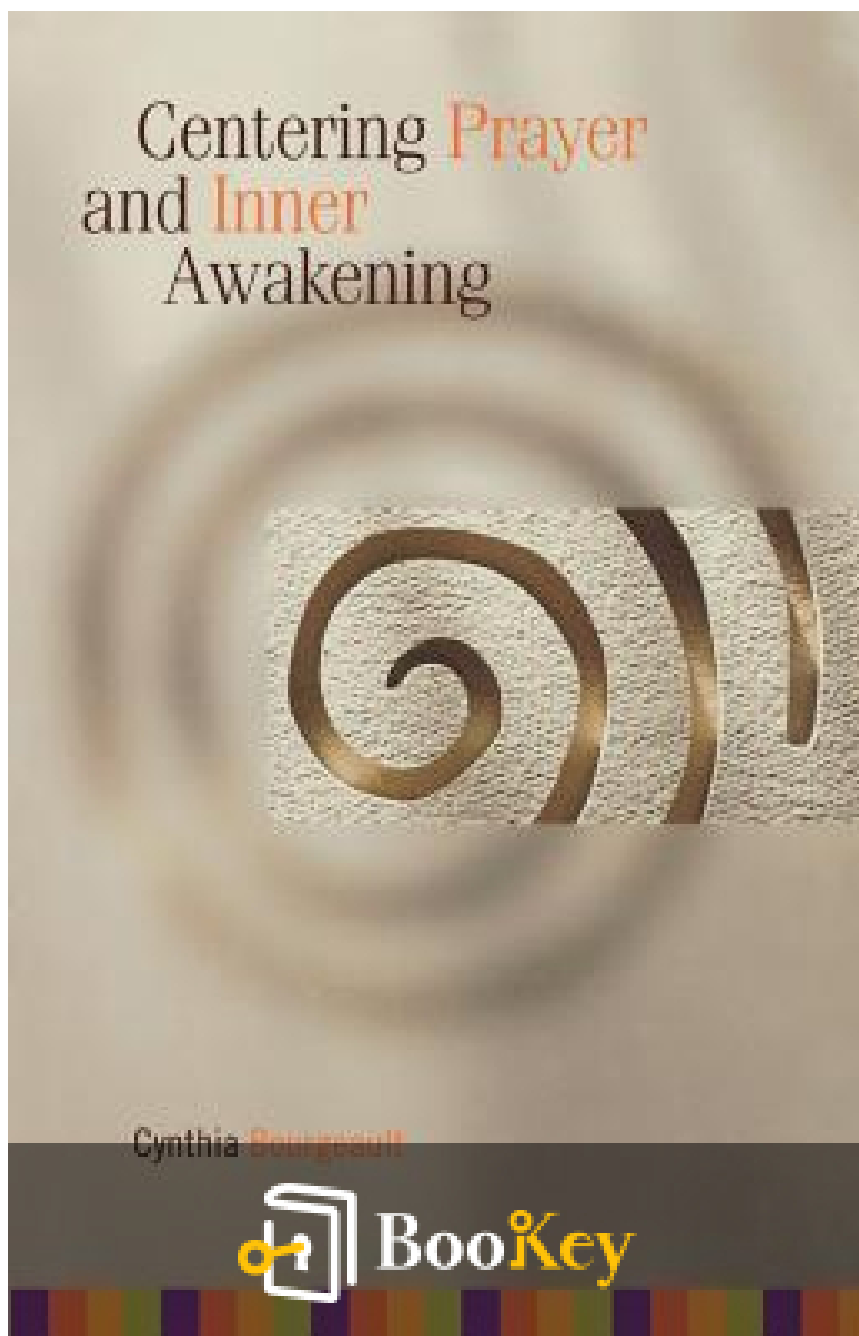


Centering Prayer And Inner Awakening PDF (Limited Copy)

Cynthia Bourgeault



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Centering Prayer And Inner Awakening Summary

Cultivating stillness for spiritual transformation.

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About the book

In "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening," Cynthia Bourgeault invites readers into a profound spiritual journey that transcends the chaos of modern life, offering a path to deep inner stillness and connection with the divine. At the heart of her teachings is the practice of Centering Prayer, a transformative form of contemplative prayer that encourages a direct experience of God's presence through silent surrender and intention. Bourgeault eloquently intertwines insights from ancient mysticism, modern psychology, and her own rich spiritual experience, encouraging readers to let go of the mind's incessant chatter and awaken to a deeper, more authentic self. This book is not just a guide to prayer; it is an invitation to explore the depths of one's being and to discover the expansive love that lies within, making it an essential read for anyone yearning for a more enriching spiritual life.

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About the author

Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopal priest, mystic, and internationally recognized teacher of contemplative wisdom, known for her insightful contributions to the fields of spirituality and inner transformation. With a background in philosophy and a deep interest in the Christian mystic tradition, Bourgeault integrates ancient teachings with contemporary spiritual practices, making them accessible and relevant to modern seekers. She is a founding member of The Contemplative Society, an organization dedicated to fostering the transformative power of spiritual practice, and has authored several influential books that explore the intersection of meditation, prayer, and awareness. Her unique perspective on Centering Prayer as both a spiritual discipline and a pathway to awakening has resonated deeply with audiences worldwide.

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Chapter 1 Summary: 1 Contemplative Prayer and Centering Prayer

In her exploration of contemplative prayer and Centering Prayer, Cynthia Bourgeault emphasizes the profound nature of genuine prayer, which transcends mere requests for personal desires or societal prejudices. True prayer acknowledges God as the ultimate source of existence and goodness, inviting individuals to connect with this divine presence. This awareness forms the foundation of prayer, allowing for a deeper communication and worship that centers on this supreme power.

Bourgeault reflects on her early experiences with prayer, highlighting how she learned that prayer involves not only speaking to God but also listening—an understanding cultivated during her time at a Quaker school, where silent worship fostered a deep sense of God's loving presence. This contemplative approach, often misperceived as advanced or mystical, is rooted in a simple, wordless openness to divine presence. Children, in their innate simplicity, grasp this intuitive form of prayer, which can be likened to returning to a natural state of being effortlessly connected to the divine.

As adults, however, the complexity of life often detracts from this innate intimacy with God. The noise of daily existence engulfs the silent connection many adults yearn for, making contemplative prayer seem daunting upon re-encountering it. Practices such as silent walks or retreats

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can quiet external distractions, yet the deeper challenge lies in silencing the incessant internal chatter. The ability to foster this inner stillness is a key aspect of Centering Prayer, which Bourgeault describes as a method to reconnect with our inherent inclination toward the inner life found in childhood.

Centering Prayer is a straightforward practice aimed at cultivating this connection. Participants are encouraged to sit quietly, open their hearts to the divine, and acknowledge thoughts as they arise without judgment. Instead of engaging with these thoughts, practitioners gently return their focus to a chosen “sacred word” that symbolizes their intention, such as "peace" or "be still." This process not only quiets the mind but also allows for a deeper engagement with the divine, occurring beyond the immediate awareness of the participant.

The effects of Centering Prayer are profound and transformative, even if the practitioner may feel that nothing overtly significant occurs during the practice. Internally, processes of awakening and rearrangement are consistently at work, facilitating a closer connection to the divine and fostering personal growth. This interior awakening, which Bourgeault identifies as the essence of Centering Prayer, emphasizes that the experience, though private, is part of a larger divine interplay between one's innermost self and God. Thus, in the quiet depths of Centering Prayer, participants engage in a sacred exchange that not only enriches their spiritual

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understanding but also invites them home to a state of being that lies closer to their essence than they may realize.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The transformative power of listening in prayer.

Critical Interpretation: Imagine reclaiming the quietude of your inner self, where genuine connection with the divine awaits—this is what Centering Prayer invites you to explore. It's easy to get lost in the cacophony of daily life, where prayer often morphs into a monologue of requests and needs. Yet, what if you shifted your approach and allowed yourself to listen deeply instead? As Cynthia Bourgeault reveals, true prayer transcends words; it becomes an open-hearted invitation to encounter the sacred essence of God. You can start this journey by simply sitting in stillness, choosing a word like 'peace' that resonates with your soul, and then quietly returning to it each time your mind begins to stray. In these moments of surrender, you may find not just answers to your questions but a profound sense of alignment with the divine. By embracing this practice, you begin to reconnect with that childlike simplicity, nurturing an intimate relationship with God that fills your life with meaning and purpose. This sacred exchange can awaken a transformation within you, inviting you home to the tranquility and connection that lies at the very core of your being.

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Chapter 2 Summary: 2 Deeper Silence, Deeper Self

In exploring the profound nature of silence, Cynthia Bourgeault emphasizes that silence serves as a critical context for contemplative prayer. This discussion identifies two distinct types of silence: outer silence, often experienced during retreats or quiet moments, allows for free exploration of thoughts, emotions, and spiritual reflections. Conversely, interior silence, or intentional silence, poses a greater challenge. This practice involves cultivating an inner stillness by consciously restraining the mind's tendency to wander, detaching from thoughts and distractions.

1. **The Necessity of Intentional Silence:** Engaging in intentional silence requires effort and often meets with internal resistance. Many may question the efficacy of simply sitting in silence, wondering how it contributes to genuine prayer. Yet, across various spiritual traditions—including Buddhist, Sufi, and Christian practices—practicing intentional silence is deemed essential for spiritual transformation and awakening. Such practices are not optional but crucial for deepening the soul's connection with the divine.

2. **Awakening the True Self:** Bourgeault conveys that spiritual awakening transcends the narrow confines of personal identity, urging a recognition of the deeper Self that lies beneath the anxious and busy ego. Often described as the True Self or Essential Self, this aspect embodies a richer, more authentic existence. The spiritual journey involves discerning between the

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smaller self—characterized by various anxieties and desires—and the deeper Self, which leads us to a broader understanding of our purpose and connection to God.

3. Levels of Awareness: To illustrate the journey toward spiritual awareness, Bourgeault references Father Thomas Keating's bull's-eye diagram of awareness levels. Ordinary awareness exists in a chaotic landscape of thoughts and anxieties, while spiritual awareness emerges when individuals engage deeply with their essence and divine connection. Ordinary awareness, often tied to ego, generates feelings of isolation. In contrast, spiritual awareness fosters a sense of belonging and unity with all creation.

4. The Divine Indwelling: This inner exploration reveals the idea of divine indwelling—the belief that within each person lies a core where God's presence resides. While humanity is distinct from God, there exists a rich interconnectedness that nurtures spiritual growth. Through the practice of contemplative prayer, individuals grow to recognize and nourish this divine spark that points toward profound truths about existence and selfhood.

5. Integration of Awareness: The biblical narrative of Mary and Martha provides a relatable framework for understanding the dynamics of awareness. Martha, displaying ordinary awareness, becomes overwhelmed by tasks, while Mary embodies spiritual awareness by being present with Christ. This contrast highlights the importance of integrating these

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levels—allowing spiritual awareness to inform and guide ordinary actions rather than being dominated by them.

6. **Breaking the Egoic Cycle:** Intentional silence offers a pathway to disrupt the habitual thinking patterns of ordinary awareness, likened to "putting a stick in the spoke." This transformative silence grants access to deeper insights that remain obscured by incessant thoughts. Although it may initially feel like a void, it ultimately leads to a multi-dimensional understanding of the self and divine unity, fostering a robust spiritual life informed by love rather than fear.

7. **Expanding Beyond the Individual:** Though introspection in prayer may appear private, its effects resonate beyond the individual. Engaging in Centering Prayer integrates personal spirituality with a broader mission to embody Christ's teachings. By cultivating a life rooted in love and a deep understanding of divine presence, individuals contribute to a transformative energy that reaches into their relationships and communities.

Summarizing, Bourgeault's work invites readers to recognize the necessity and richness of silence in their spiritual lives. By embracing intentional silence, individuals can awaken to their true selves, connect with the divine indwelling within, and transform both their inner and outer worlds through love and service. The journey calls for a profound shift from an ego-centric existence to one that recognizes the interconnected fabric of life, inviting an

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authentic encounter with the divine that is responsive to the call of the gospel.

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Chapter 3: 3 The Method of Centering Prayer

In the exploration of Centering Prayer, a distinct form of contemplative practice, the initial challenge lies in the desire to engage in regular meditation. Once that desire is established, the focus shifts to the methodology of Centering Prayer, which is unique in its approach compared to other meditation techniques. This practice seeks to disrupt the habitual whirlwind of thoughts, as encapsulated in Thomas Keating's metaphor of "taking a brief vacation from yourself," helping practitioners navigate the subtleties that can arise during meditation.

1. **Attention and Intention:** Meditation techniques can primarily be categorized into three groups: concentrative, awareness, and surrender methods. Centering Prayer is distinctive as it aligns with the surrender methodology, focusing predominantly on intention rather than concentrated attention. While concentrative methods require a task to anchor attention, such as repeating a mantra, Centering Prayer encourages a more fluid, intention-based approach, allowing practitioners to bypass strict focus. It invites individuals to cultivate an open availability to God, transcending the

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Chapter 4 Summary: 4 Handling Thoughts during Prayer Time

In Chapter 4 of "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening," Cynthia Bourgeault delves into the intricacies of handling thoughts during prayer time, framing the discussion through two key terms from Christian spirituality: cataphatic and apophatic prayer. Understanding these concepts is essential for comprehending the transformative nature of Centering Prayer.

1. Definitions of Prayer Types: Cataphatic prayer engages our cognitive faculties—reason, memory, emotion, and imagination—linking us with our egoic self and facilitating traditional practices in a church setting, such as liturgical prayers and meditation on gospel stories. In contrast, apophatic prayer transcends these faculties, involving a more subtle awareness that bypasses the mental processes tied to selfhood. This type of prayer invites a deeper inner communion with God, encouraging practitioners to embrace a silence that does not serve as a prelude to God's revelations but as a distinct form of spiritual perception.

2. Understanding Silence in Prayer: Central to the practice of Centering Prayer is recognizing the radically apophatic nature of silent prayer. This form of silence should not be viewed merely as a space to receive content from God. Rather, it is a surrender into the profound stillness itself—a

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letting go of ego-driven objectives and stepping into a deeper, unmediated encounter with God. This shift in perception allows for a richer exploration of one's inner self, fostering spiritual insights more organically.

3. Handling Thoughts: Effectively managing thoughts during Centering Prayer is pivotal. Thoughts can manifest as ordinary reflections, emotional attachments, self-referential dialogues, or subconscious expressions, each presenting a unique challenge during meditation. Bourgeault introduces the metaphor of boats floating down a river, representing various thoughts that may arise in prayer. The ideal position for the practitioner is to adopt the perspective of a scuba diver on the riverbed, observing thoughts as they pass without the desire to engage or react.

4. Types of Thoughts: The text categorizes thoughts encountered during prayer—ordinary thoughts, attractive thoughts with emotional hooks, self-reflective thoughts, and deeper unconscious thoughts. Recognizing these categories aids in the practice, as being forearmed enables practitioners to allow thoughts to drift by without clinging to them. This acknowledgment turns the process of letting go into a more graceful act.

5. The Art of Letting Go: The foundational aim of Centering Prayer is to cultivate a detached attitude toward thoughts rather than attempting to eliminate them. Adhering to the "Four Rs" approach—resist no thought, retain no thought, react to no thought, return to the sacred word—supports

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practitioners in developing a gentle method of managing thoughts during prayer. This process emphasizes that thoughts are transient and do not warrant emotional engagement.

6. Simultaneity in Awareness A typical experience in Centering Prayer may involve simultaneous recognition of thoughts while also maintaining a deeper connection to inner stillness. The ability to exist in this dual awareness is integral to the practice, where one learns to navigate between surface distractions and deeper spiritual awareness.

Through this exploration, Bourgeault underscores that allowing thoughts to emerge and recede naturally cultivates a pathway to the apophatic realm. This act of letting go serves as a profound spiritual lesson, opening doors to deeper communion with God and fostering ongoing transformative healing within the self. The chapter invites readers to embrace the full essence of Centering Prayer, rooting their practice in a serene surrender that's central to spiritual awakening.

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Chapter 5 Summary: 5 Spiritual Non-Possessiveness

Chapter 5 of "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening" by Cynthia

Bourgeault delves into the intricate relationship between spiritual practice and the concept of non-possessiveness, particularly as it relates to Centering Prayer. This chapter categorizes the insights and intuitive revelations that one may experience during prayer, highlighting the importance of understanding and transcending one's attachment to these experiences.

1. **The Challenge of Insights and Intercessions:** The chapter begins by addressing the tension between the traditional cataphatic approach—where contemplation is viewed as a means to receive messages from God—and the apophatic approach of Centering Prayer, which emphasizes the importance of letting go of thoughts and experiences to enter a deeper state of communion with the divine. During periods of silent prayer, individuals often find themselves receiving insights or intuitive guidance, which can feel compelling but must be approached with caution. The temptation to cling to these insights can allure practitioners away from the core practice of Centering Prayer.

2. **The Impermanence of Experiences:** Bourgeault provides reassurance that genuine insights are not lost during prayer. Instead, they tend to return to consciousness later, often manifested in dreams or reflections post-prayer. She underscores the necessity of allowing ideas to surface naturally without

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succumbing to the impulse to grasp or cling to them during prayer. Many insights may be illusory or fleeting—much like dreams that fade upon awakening—highlighting the ego's tendency to fill the silence with distractions from deeper spiritual truths.

3. **Spiritual Non-Possessiveness:** The author introduces the concept of spiritual non-possessiveness, which is epitomized in Jesus' teachings and the Beatitudes. This form of non-attachment extends beyond material possessions to encompass spiritual experiences and insights. Bourgeault notes that while accumulating spiritual experiences can serve a useful purpose during the early stages of one's spiritual journey, it may ultimately hinder progress toward deeper union with the divine. Spiritual materialism, a term coined by Trungpa Rinpoche, warns against the misuse of spiritual insights to bolster the ego.

4. **Disciplining the Imagination:** Bourgeault explains that the imagination can be a double-edged sword. While it is a tool for creativity, in the context of spiritual practice, it can also lead individuals away from authentic contemplation. The desert fathers and mothers emphasized the need to tame the imagination to thwart distractions that threaten spiritual development. The chapter draws a parallel with Tibetan Buddhist teachings on dying to self at the moment of death, emphasizing that one must recognize the inner luminosity of truth and resist the temptation to engage with fleeting thoughts and emotions during prayer.

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5. **Moving Beyond Dualism:** A critical point Bourgeault discusses is the struggle with the division between the experiencer and the experience itself. Traditional spiritual paths often emphasize accumulating experiences leading to enlightenment. However, this approach inherently fosters a dualistic viewpoint that avoids accessing unitive consciousness. To truly experience unity with the divine, one must let go of the attachment to experiences and the self that possesses them.

6. **The Sacrificial Path of Letting Go:** The chapter concludes with the idea that true spiritual growth lies in the willingness to surrender the self and all its attachments. Bourgeault emphasizes that, in Centering Prayer, every act of letting go is not an act of deprivation but an invitation to deeper communion. In doing so, practitioners encounter a richer, more profound relationship with the divine—the "unseen person" that becomes known through the practice of surrender.

In essence, Chapter 5 calls upon practitioners of Centering Prayer to embrace spiritual non-possessiveness, warning against the allure of intellectual or emotional insights. Through disciplined practice and a commitment to the apophatic way, individuals can cultivate a deeper connection to their true selves and the divine presence within. The emphasis on letting go rather than accumulating creates a pathway toward genuine spiritual awakening, urging individuals to trust the process and find

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fulfillment in the act of surrender itself.

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Chapter 6: 6 Centering Prayer and Christian Tradition

Centering Prayer and Christian Tradition is a pivotal exploration of the emergence and significance of Centering Prayer within the Christian spiritual landscape, particularly in relation to its historic roots and current practice. This chapter outlines the evolution of contemplative prayer, challenges common misconceptions about its Christian foundations, and highlights the pivotal figures who revived these ancient practices.

1. The Birth of Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer emerged in the Christian realm in the mid-1970s alongside the increasing influence of Eastern spiritual practices. Critics often dismiss it as merely a Western adaptation of Eastern meditation, suggesting it lacks genuine Christian roots. However, key figures such as Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, and John Main, all Benedictine monks, argue that meditation is intrinsic to Christian practice. They posited that the contemplative prayer tradition had been lost and sought to resurrect it not just for monastic communities, but for a world yearning for spiritual depth.

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Chapter 7 Summary: 7 The Loss and Recovery of the Christian Contemplative Tradition

The narrative of the loss and recovery of the Christian contemplative tradition reveals a profound shift in the understanding of spiritual practices within Christianity. This evolution is metaphorically illustrated through the imagery of ladders and circles, emphasizing a distinct contrast in perception. While ladders suggest a linear ascent towards a goal, circles evoke a more fluid, organic movement. This circularity is crucial in understanding *lectio divina*, where attendees cycle through stages—*lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*—rather than adhering to a rigid progression.

1. The approach to *lectio divina* practiced by seasoned contemplatives encourages an adaptability, which contrasts sharply with the historical portrayal of it as a strict ladder of prayer laid out by Guigo II in the twelfth century. Guigo's conceptual framework contributed to a hierarchical understanding of prayer, categorizing *contemplatio* as the apex for only a select few deemed contemplative. This stratification led to a divide, with contemplative practices being segmented and increasingly associated with elite spirituality, distancing the broader Christian community from its rich contemplative heritage.

2. By the time of Thomas Keating's leadership in the 20th century, the notion of contemplation had become so obscure that even seminaries were

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hesitant to engage with it, leading to a stark realization that the contemplative path existed as a hidden aspect of Christian spirituality. Inside monastic life, practices had stagnated at discursive meditation, partly due to the prevailing belief that deeper forms of contemplation were reserved for rare individuals. This mindset fostered a cycle of exclusivity and reluctance to embrace the communal aspects of contemplative prayer.

3. The spiritual crisis emerging from the separation of word and silence reflects a significant disruption in the understanding of Christian spirituality. As the age of scholasticism progressed, Western Christianity lost its connection to the mystical traditions that originally interwove word and silence, leading to dogmatic and contentious theological developments over centuries. The shift away from contemplative practices caused a disempowerment of the faithful, as the core dimensions of spirituality began to wither, reducing the capacity for believers to engage with divine truth beyond mere rationality.

4. Despite this historical decline, moments of renewal arose within both Catholicism and Protestantism through various devotional and mystical movements that sought to reclaim contemplative practices. The late 1960s ushered in a significant reawakening, evidenced by the burgeoning practice of Centering Prayer introduced by Keating and his monastic peers. This practice initially faced skepticism for potentially bypassing deeper preparatory stages, but contrary to fears, it reinvigorated interest in biblical

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study and community engagement, suggesting a resurgence of the contemplative spirit within contemporary Christianity.

5. The misconceptions surrounding ‘acquired’ versus ‘infused’ contemplation further muddled the waters of spirituality, insinuating that contemplation could only be divinely bestowed rather than cultivated through practice. This dichotomy created unnecessary barriers and a sense of elitism, fostering a competitive environment where the achievement of contemplation became the ultimate goal. Keating's assertion that Centering Prayer aids individuals in overcoming barriers to contemplative experience contests these notions, advocating that contemplative awareness is intrinsic to the human spirit and can be developed through sincere effort.

6. Ultimately, the current understanding of contemplation suggests a paradigm shift, moving away from the notion of God as an external provider of grace. Instead, it presents a unified vision of the divine, interwoven with human experience, where contemplation is seen not as a distant aspiration but as an inherent part of the human condition. Engaging in contemplative practice allows individuals to access a deeper consciousness, characterized by unity and presence within each moment, revealing that the capacity for contemplation is always within reach, waiting to be recognized and embraced.

In summary, this exploration of the collective amnesia about the Christian

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contemplative tradition highlights an urgent call for recovery. It emphasizes the need for a reinterpretation of contemplative practices that integrate both the richness of scriptural engagement and the profound depths of silence within the spiritual journey, ultimately seeking to restore a holistic vision of the Christian contemplative path.

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Chapter 8 Summary: 8 The Theology of Centering Prayer

In Chapter 8 of "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening" by Cynthia Bourgeault, the author explores the theological underpinnings of Centering Prayer, emphasizing its deep compatibility with Christian thought and practice. She begins by asserting that understanding the theological resonance of Centering Prayer can illuminate the essence of Christian self-understanding. Here are the key points distilled into a structured summary:

- 1. Integration with Christian Theology:** Centering Prayer can be defined as a method distinctly aligned with Christian teachings. It resonates deeply with the transformative aspects of the gospel, enhancing one's journey toward becoming a better Christian by connecting with fundamental theological principles.
- 2. Dying to Self:** A central theme in Christianity is the concept of "dying to self," articulated in Matthew 16:25, which advocates for relinquishing individual desires to make space for God's lead. While frequently associated with self-will, Bourgeault highlights an additional layer of meaning, situating meditation as a practice that embodies a more profound understanding of this self-denial. Through meditation, practitioners might experience a mini-death of the ego, ultimately leading to a realization of a deeper identity that transcends the egoic self.

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3. Participating in the Death and Resurrection of Christ: Meditation allows believers to engage in the dual aspects of Christ's journey: His death and resurrection. In the meditation experience, individuals let go of their identity, echoing Jesus' own teachings, leading to a new awareness of life that empowers resurrection-like experiences.

4. Awakening through the Wisdom Tradition Centering Prayer aligns with broader spiritual traditions that recognize the duality of self; the distinction between the illusory egoic self and the spiritual Self. This understanding is crucial for awakening, as it leads practitioners to perceive reality and truths from a higher perspective, allowing them to authentically express the teachings of Jesus in actionable ways.

5. The Role of Meditation: Meditation acts as a transformative bridge between egoic awareness and spiritual consciousness, training individuals to navigate their thoughts—especially negative ones—while cultivating a deeper connection to their spiritual selves. Such practices foster the ability to engage with life authentically and with compassion, reflecting Christ's teachings.

6. Kenosis: The Principle of Self-Emptying: The concept of kenosis, or self-emptying, is central to understanding Jesus' life and mission. St. Paul articulates this principle, highlighting that Jesus embodied self-emptying as

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a pathway that ultimately leads believers back to divine unity. This metaphysical perspective suggests that self-emptying is not merely a means but a rich expression of divine love and creative manifestation.

7. Divergent Paths in Spiritual Practice: Bourgeault contrasts two pathways in spirituality—one of conservation, accumulating spiritual energy, and another of extravagant giving (kenosis). The former seeks unity through ascension, while the latter approaches the core of existence through radical self-disclosure, which paradoxically opens pathways to new life and creation.

8. Implication for Centering Prayer: Centering Prayer exemplifies the practice of kenosis, focusing not on attaining a goal or enriching individual experience but rather on the act of self-giving and surrender. This paradigm creates resonance within the life of Jesus and aligns meditation with the fundamental principles of Christian practice—emphasizing that true freedom and unity can be achieved through complete self-emptying.

In summary, Cynthia Bourgeault illustrates in this chapter that Centering Prayer encapsulates the essence of Christian theology through its method of self-emptying and alignment with the transformative power of the gospel. This alignment not only validates the integrity of Centering Prayer as a practice but also facilitates profound spiritual awakening and connection with the divine. Through this approach, practitioners are encouraged to

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embody the teachings of Jesus authentically, living from a place of generous love and radical self-giving.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Dying to Self

Critical Interpretation: Imagine embarking on a transformative journey where each moment of stillness invites you to let go of the burdens of your ego. In the practice of Centering Prayer, as you surrender your personal desires and allow yourself to die to self, you embrace the profound liberation that comes with relinquishing control. This act of 'dying to self' isn't just about renunciation; it's about awakening to the deeper reality of who you are beyond the confines of your ego. Feel the weight lifted as you connect with a wellspring of divine presence that encourages you to let your authentic self shine. As you engage in this sacred practice, you discover that true freedom lies in embracing humility and self-emptying, empowering you to engage with the world around you in a more loving and compassionate way, resonating with the teachings of Christ in every action.

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Chapter 9: 9 The Divine Therapy

In the late 1960s, Thomas Keating and his colleagues initiated the development of Centering Prayer as a way to renew contemplative practice among Christians, specifically addressing the trend of younger Catholics gravitating towards Eastern spirituality. Centering Prayer, inspired by the fourteenth-century “Cloud of Unknowing,” aimed to deepen one’s relationship with God through a devotional method devoid of psychological implications at the outset. However, the first intensive Centering Prayer retreat in 1983 revealed unforeseen psychological dynamics, as participants experienced intense emotional releases throughout their practice. Keating noted that the depth of the emotional outpouring reflected a rapid engagement with the unconscious that could take much longer to surface in traditional monastic life.

This transformative experience led Keating to recognize that Centering Prayer serves as a surrender or receptive method, fostering profound engagement with the unconscious—an observation later corroborated by emerging transpersonal psychology. He discovered that this unloading

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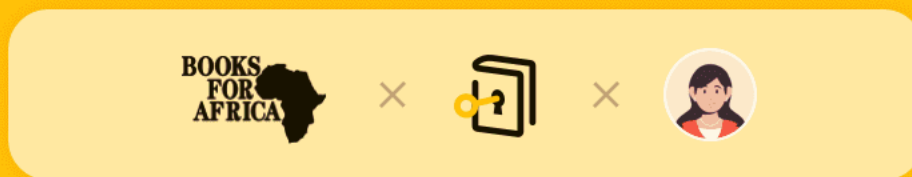
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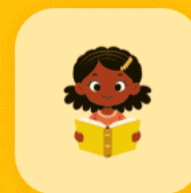
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Chapter 10 Summary: 10 From Healing to Holiness

In Chapter 10 of "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening," Cynthia Bourgeault delves into the metaphor of the "divine therapist" while exploring its pros and cons within the context of spiritual growth. This metaphor has found resonance in the recovery community, particularly within programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and prison ministries, offering an accessible understanding of divine assistance during personal struggles. However, its potential misinterpretations can obscure the deeper spiritual truths it aims to convey.

One significant distortion arises when the metaphor is taken too literally, causing some to view the divine therapist as a literal figure rather than a poetic illustration. Bourgeault emphasizes Thomas Keating's intention behind the term, which should be understood as a metaphorical expression rather than an explicit doctrine. This caution is crucial since many followers of Keating may inadvertently present his teachings as unquestionable truths, thereby missing the nuances embedded in his poetic approach.

1. Ego Healing vs. Ego Transcendence A key area of confusion lies in conflating the healing of the ego with transcending it. Traditional psychotherapy often aims to repair the ego to promote better functioning in the world. Yet, classic spirituality seeks to go beyond ego identification to realize the "true self." Bourgeault points out that while Keating

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acknowledges the ego's woundedness and the need for healing, the ultimate goal extends to a transformation that goes beyond mere ego improvement—an awakening to the true self that exists outside the confines of ordinary ego.

2. Humanity's Condition: Bourgeault urges a reevaluation of how we perceive the false self. Rather than viewing it solely as a pathology, which can lead to a sense of innate deficiency in humanity, she invites readers to adopt a perspective where the challenges posed by the false self serve as the catalyst for spiritual transformation. Drawing on insights from depth psychology and spiritual traditions, she argues that these struggles are not merely obstacles but essential components of the human journey toward realizing the divine image within.

3. Regressing in the Service of Transcendence The chapter discusses the importance of creating a safe space for vulnerability in personal healing. However, Bourgeault warns against becoming overly focused on personal experiences at the detriment of communal and cosmic responsibility. She shares an illustrative anecdote about the consequences of self-absorption during a Centering Prayer retreat, highlighting the risk of losing sight of the primary purpose of contemplative prayer—interceding for the world and engaging with others.

Bourgeault concludes that while the metaphor of divine therapy can resonate

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powerfully with contemporary sensibilities, it must not eclipse the essential Christian understanding of creation as fundamentally good and the call to participate in a broader divine mission. The transformative power of prayer, particularly in methods like Centering Prayer, extends beyond personal healing; it is a communal act rooted in worship and compassion for all of humanity. By maintaining the integrity of this perspective, practitioners can engage in a deeper, more fulfilling journey of sanctification rather than limiting themselves to therapeutic outcomes. The ultimate goal remains not just the alleviation of suffering but the full realization of divinity within one's being, emphasizing that genuine transformation encompasses both healing and transcending the ego.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Ego Healing vs. Ego Transcendence

Critical Interpretation: Imagine, for a moment, that your journey through life transcends the simple pursuit of refining who you already are. In Chapter 10, Bourgeault profoundly illustrates that healing your ego is merely the first step; the true alchemy lies in transcending that ego altogether to awaken to your authentic self. Picture this: as you let go of old narratives and release the tight grip of self-importance, you open a doorway to profound inner freedom. Each time you practice Centering Prayer, you are invited not just to mend what's wounded, but to discover a boundless essence that connects you to the divine. This awakening redefines your struggles not as failures but as stepping stones to transformation, illuminating your path towards a deeper purpose where compassion and unity with the world flourish. Allow this realization to inspire you: healing is just the beginning of a radiant journey towards embodying your truest self, enriching both your existence and the collective spirit of humanity.

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Chapter 11 Summary: 11 Attention of the Heart

In Chapter 11 of "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening," Cynthia

Bourgeault delves into the profound concept of "Attention of the Heart," exploring meditation's deeper dimensions beyond mere mental clarity.

While traditional meditation typically aims to quiet the mind and cultivate a witnessing presence, Bourgeault highlights that Centering Prayer deviates from this norm by introducing a unique approach to attention that focuses on the heart.

1. Most people associate meditation with stilling or collecting the mind to gain a clear, reflective state. This requires calming the chaotic thoughts that resemble a stormy lake, enabling a deeper awareness of peaceful states and unified perceptions. Traditional meditation practices often emphasize a sharp, conscious presence or witnessing quality, enabling practitioners to observe thoughts without attachment. However, Centering Prayer complicates this paradigm by suggesting a more instinctual engagement with thoughts.

2. Thomas Keating's illustrative metaphor likens the meditator to a scuba diver on a riverbed, watching thoughts as boats floating above. Unlike classic awareness meditation focused on continual observation, Centering Prayer encourages practitioners to notice when they become entangled in thoughts and to redirect their attention without sustained effort.

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3. Critics of Centering Prayer from more traditional meditation circles voice concerns that it lacks the necessary concentration and presence integral to effective practice. John Main, a prominent figure in Christian meditation, emphasizes the importance of sustained attention, equating distraction with a loss of purpose. He views the journey of meditation as a conscious endeavor, likening it to rowing a boat to reach the opposite shore.

4. Centering Prayer, however, champions an alternative pathway referred to as the “attention of the heart.” Stemming from the teachings of Simeon the New Theologian, this practice engages spiritual presence beyond the confines of intellectual concentration. Simeon posits that truly embracing one’s spiritual journey necessitates this heartfelt attention, which fosters deeper compassion and awareness—qualities that transcend the limitations of the ego.

5. Simeon identifies three approaches to cultivating attention of the heart. The first involves uniting emotional concentration with contemplative practices; however, it can lead to a dependency on emotional highs instead of lasting peace. The second, self-examination and thought collecting, risks remaining purely cerebral and disconnected from deeper affective engagement. The third approach, which aligns with Centering Prayer, pivots towards surrender and freedom from clinging to superficial attachments.

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6. In Centering Prayer, practitioners cultivate "attention of the heart" by embracing a state of openness and release, thereby aligning with Simeon's teachings. This form of attention, marked by surrender, seeks the divine presence in a state of emptiness rather than through the clarity of thought alone.

7. The exploration of attention of the heart also leads to the notion of a magnetic center within the practitioner—a physiological sensation accompanying spiritual engagement. This magnetic center develops as one experiences the release associated with self-emptying and can nurture an instinctive pull towards deeper spiritual awareness even outside of formal practice.

8. A key aspect of this magnetic center is that it becomes a guiding force throughout daily life, enhancing the sense of connection with the divine and the authentic self. As practitioners deepen their connection to this center, they cultivate an innate compass that not only guides them home in their spiritual journey but also aids in developing the witnessing presence in overcoming the challenges of intermediate spiritual work.

In summary, Bourgeault invites us to expand our understanding of meditation through the lens of heart-centered awareness, suggesting that true spiritual practice is less about rigid control of the mind and more about inviting a profound inner stillness that resonates with divine connection.

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Centering Prayer embodies this practice, allowing for a unique engagement with the divine that fosters both surrender and a physical sensation of spiritual gravitation.

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Chapter 12: 12 Working with an Inner Observer

In the realm of spiritual training, mastering one's inner self starts with cultivating a robust inner observer or witness. This fundamental tenet suggests that one cannot significantly evolve from an ego-driven existence without first establishing a level of awareness that transcends ordinary consciousness. An adage within my inner work group asserted, “You can’t move a plank you’re standing on!” This means that as long as one's only awareness is its most basic form—ordinary awareness—there is little opportunity to shift the weight of one's being from the confines of the ego to a more authentic center. The aim is not merely to develop a “healthy ego,” characterized by a respectful recognition of self and others' boundaries, but to forge a deeper understanding of existence.

Eckhart Tolle articulately defines the ego as “the unobserved mind,” highlighting its tendency to become entirely enveloped in its inner dramas, leading to a state of unconsciousness akin to waking sleep. In this typical state, individuals oscillate between two forms of unconsciousness—one where they are identified with their thoughts and emotions, thus primarily

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Chapter 13 Summary: 13 The Welcoming Prayer

In Chapter 13 of "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening" by Cynthia Bourgeault, the author introduces the concept of the Welcoming Prayer, framing it as a crucial practice for individuals who have progressed in Centering Prayer. This chapter serves to emphasize inner awakening and the ability to navigate emotional upheavals through a systematic approach. The essence of the content is best summarized through the following key points.

- 1. Understanding the False Self:** The chapter starts with the introduction of a diagram labeled "The False Self in Action," illustrating how unconscious habits and emotional programs bind us to a false sense of self. These programs revolve around three main energy centers: security/survival, esteem/affection, and power/control. This framework explains why many individuals experience recurring frustrations, contributing to a vicious cycle that dulls awareness and perpetuates suffering.
- 2. Identification with Attachments and Aversions** The chapter delves into how these core programs manifest in daily life through attachments (that which makes us feel secure) and aversions (that which causes us discomfort). Our limited awareness often leads us to enter situations with hidden agendas, driven by the need to fulfill our ego's desires for control, acceptance, or safety. This often leads to frustration and defensive emotional

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responses.

3. Cycles of Emotional Reaction: Bourgeault outlines the emotional escalation process: initial irritation transitions into identifiable frustration, followed by a full emotional response marked by anger or pain, compounded by mental commentary that fuels the emotional fire. This feedback loop reinforces false self programming and drags us further down into unconscious behavior.

4. Breaking the Cycle: The real potential for inner awakening arises in the brief moment before full emotional identification occurs, identified as "point 5A" on the diagram. Centering Prayer plays a vital role here as it teaches practitioners to gently let go of thoughts before they morph into full emotional experiences.

5. Introducing the Welcoming Prayer: Developed by Mary Mrozowski in the 1980s, the Welcoming Prayer offers practitioners an active method for integrating the principles of Centering Prayer into their daily lives. It is designed not only as a therapeutic tool to address afflictive emotions but also as a powerful means for deeper inner awakening. The practice encourages individuals to engage with their emotional life, welcoming all feelings as they arise.

6. Three-Step Process: The practice is structured around three pivotal

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steps:

- **Focus and Sink In:** Attune yourself to the physical sensations associated with emotional states, becoming fully present to the experience. This step requires recognizing feelings without attempting to analyze or escape them.
- **Welcome:** Embrace the feelings you experience instead of running from them. By saying “welcome” to your emotions, you disarm their power, thereby creating an atmosphere of acceptance that facilitates deeper transformation.
- **Let Go:** This step involves a conscious release of the identification with those feelings. It can take the form of a simple acknowledgment of the emotion or a more in-depth litany of release, ultimately reinforcing the practice of surrender.

7. Depth of Practice: The Welcoming Prayer is emphasized not just as a means to cope with suffering but as a path towards genuine spiritual freedom. By incorporating this practice into daily routines, individuals can move beyond mere emotional reaction into a state of conscious presence, leading to overarching transformation of consciousness.

8. Integration with Inner Work: As readers are guided through the Welcoming Prayer's nuances, Bourgeault emphasizes the importance of this practice in liberating life energy traditionally trapped in negative emotional cycles. The resulting vitality fosters a deeper connection to higher

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consciousness.

9. Application and Being Present: The chapter also details examples and personal narratives showing the power of the Welcoming Prayer to transform experiences of grief and pain into moments of profound relational connection with God or the divine.

10. Final Reflections on Surrender: Bourgeault captures the essence of the Welcoming Prayer through the life of Mary Mrozowski, illustrating how the practice shaped her spiritual journey. Filled with anecdotes that convey the heart of her teachings, the chapter concludes with Mrozowski's embodiment of unconditional presence and surrender, underscoring that true inner work is ultimately about cultivating an awakened and surrendered consciousness.

Through these principles, the chapter presents the Welcoming Prayer not merely as a practice for emotional management but as a transformative tool for expanding one's consciousness, leading to inner freedom and a more profound connection with the divine.

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Chapter 14 Summary: 14 Centering Prayer and Christian Life

Chapter 14 of "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening" by Cynthia

Bourgeault explores the intricate relationship between Centering Prayer and the Christian life, emphasizing the dual themes of kenosis and perichoresis. At its core, kenosis, the act of self-emptying love exemplified by Christ, serves as a foundational aspect of Christian mystical theology. It describes not only the personal experience of individuals in prayer but also facilitates a deeper understanding of the relationships within the Trinity—where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit engage in a dynamic exchange of self-giving love. This interrelationship is likened to the mechanism of a watermill, where each act of self-emptying leads to divine energy flowing into the world, creating a cascade of love and creative energy.

1. The Communal Aspect of Centering Prayer: Contrary to the common perception of meditation as a solitary practice, Centering Prayer is fundamentally communal. Each act of self-emptying connects individuals to the overarching vine of love that nurtures all creation. Just as Jesus illustrates in John 15, prayer and contemplation are meant to foster a deep connection not only with God but also among people, reinforcing that the ultimate act of love transcends isolation.

2. Thomas Merton's Transformative Experience Thomas Merton's

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journey into contemplative life is recounted as a powerful example of this transformation. Initially, Merton perceived the contemplative path as a retreat from the world. However, after years of dedication, he experienced an epiphany in Louisville, where he felt a profound love for humanity, revealing the interconnectedness of all lives. This shift epitomizes the spiritual awakening to the reality of unity in divine love, moving from self-isolation to a shared existence.

3. Contemplative Prayer and Radical Transformation At an influential meeting convened by Thomas Keating, a group of contemplatives outlined a definition of contemplative prayer that places emphasis on radical transformation over silence. The participants agreed on the need for a conscious dying to self, which opens practitioners to God's love and enables them to embody the life of Christ within their actions and interactions.

4. The Role of Silence: While silence may be a useful tool for contemplation, it is not the primary focus. The essence lies in reconciliation with oneself rather than achieving an ideal state of quietude. Silence serves to strip away distractions, allowing individuals to confront their genuine selves and embrace their inner consciousness. The ultimate goal is not merely silence but a deeper connection with God and with each other.

5. A Life of Integration: The chapter elucidates that contemplative prayer does not necessitate a withdrawal from the world but rather fosters a

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richer engagement with it. The true nature of contemplation integrates prayer and action, drawing from a wellspring of divine love that inspires compassion in all aspects of life. It allows practitioners to interact with the world from a place of unity, rather than separation.

6. Unitive Consciousness: The goal of contemplative practice is unitive seeing—the recognition that God permeates all existence. It encourages a perspective that transcends the ego's desires, revealing that everything is an expression of divine love. This profound insight transforms practitioners into "beautiful Christians," capable of recognizing and nurturing love within every circumstance they face.

Ultimately, Bourgeault positions contemplative prayer as a vital aspect of the Christian journey, advocating for its integration into church life as a pathway to genuine connection with God and each other. In essence, the chapter argues for a holistic understanding of contemplation, where silence and action coalesce in the vibrant expression of love. This interconnectedness signifies a transformative power that reorients individuals back to the heart of Christian living, affirming that the Kingdom of Heaven resides within everyone.

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