

In her book, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, Cynthia Bourgeault says that centering prayer is not prayer of attention, but of *intention*. Rather than making yourself empty or still, as in Eastern meditation, you focus on your intention to be totally open to God. Of course our monkey minds easily get distracted, but that doesn't mean we've failed when that happens. As the story goes, a nun at one of Thomas Keating's workshops lamented, "Oh, Father Thomas, I'm such a failure at this prayer. In twenty minutes, I've had ten thousand thoughts." And Thomas Keating responded, "How lovely! Ten thousand opportunities to return to God!" Centering prayer is simply returning to God, expectant, open, receptive. I think of it sometimes as trying to be quiet enough to melt into the environment so I can see and hear what I'd otherwise drown out with my own activity.

Simply to do the practice, however ineptly, is to strengthen the "muscle" of surrender, says Bourgeault. The power of this prayer lies in the consent to be open to God. And as Pat reminds her students, "Chance favors the prepared mind" (Pasteur). When we read about the ancient Simeon and Anna in the Temple, prophesying about the child Jesus, I have to think that their long years of orienting themselves to God, opening their minds to God, was what prepared them to see in that child the salvation God was bringing to all people. Simeon says, "My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory for your people Israel." Anna speaks about the child to all who are looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Krista Tippett has talked about her practice of journalism as a way to expose the goodness that's there but is escaping notice—that's what I think Simeon and

Anna had trained to do. Years of prayer had conditioned them to see goodness, or to see the hand of God. Importantly, Krista Tippett also makes a distinction between good news and feel-good news, saying that “good news is complicated. The Good News is complicated, like we are.”

On a New Year’s Day when we traditionally set out our hopes and resolutions for the year ahead, it’s fitting that the scripture reading is placed in the Temple. The Temple was, for the Jewish people, the locus of all their hopes and dreams for the future. Even in Jesus’ time, when the people in charge of the Temple were doing their job poorly, Luke shows us Jesus’ parents and later Jesus himself treating the Temple as the symbol of God’s presence and promise. Right there in the Temple, Simeon also acknowledges that the good news embodied in the child Jesus includes a “sign that will be opposed . . . and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.” The Good News is complicated, like we are. It does not always seem good.

Here’s a story told by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, about this kind of complication. “Dov Beyer, an early Hasidic rabbi, speaks about the doctrine of alien thoughts. What Rabbi Beyer says is that you’ll be praying with the congregation, and you’ll really get into the prayers, they’ll make sense, they’ll be beautiful, the person leading is at the top of their game, your life is in order, the prayers are wonderful, and its been the best prayer experience you remember having. And Rabbi Beyer says, at precisely that moment, you’ll be assailed by the most lascivious thought you’ve had in decades. Your immediate reaction to the thought is, something like, not here, don’t you see what I’m trying to do? Come back at the reception later, please. So what happens when you push the thought? Well, you

push it away and it comes back even stronger and harder. And the harder you push the stronger it wants to stay there. So what you have to realize is that the reason you can't push it away, is because it's part of you.

And according to Rabbi Beyer's theory, it has chosen precisely this moment of heightened spiritual awareness and joy and connectedness as its opportunity to come out from under the rocks in your psychic cellar, like some little Hieronymous Bosch creature, saying, "Can I pray with you too please?" (hissing its yellow, putrid, sulfurous breath). And instead of trying to beat it away, what you must do is say, "There is room under my prayer shawl for you too, wretched little creature that you are. I still wish you weren't part of me. But I accept that you're part of me.

And the minute I accept that this monstrous little thought is part of me, most of its power over me is destroyed and dissolved. Most of the time, you will find a way to receive and admit the ugly little monster that has intruded into your prayer life. But if you can't think of a way to deal with it, then you must say, my praying for today is over. You close the prayer book and you're done. It was bigger than you today.

So if there's evil in me, I will never succeed in trying to banish it or push it away. That effort won't succeed, because it's part of me.

<http://jaredwitt.blogspot.com/2016/07/nightmares-and-prayers-life-under.html>

We are not meant for purity or perfection, but for wholeness. Our aim is integration, not purification.

There in a nutshell is what Jesus brought us and taught us, what prayer trains us in. Evil derives its power from our suppression of it. The Temple elites and the

Roman governor did not think they were doing anything evil when they crucified Jesus (or anybody else); they believed they were rooting out troublemakers and maintaining order. They could not recognize the evil in themselves, but they projected it onto Jesus. Jesus broke that pattern of projection and ever-escalating violence by accepting the worst they could do to him and not retaliating. Instead, he integrated it into himself, letting it kill him. The Resurrection is what happens when you break the cycle of projection: evil runs out of steam and God keeps going. All this, the story which had not yet taken place but is eternally the divine dynamic, is what Simeon and Anna proclaim in the Temple: “This child is destined . . . to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul also.”

Krista Tippett’s new book, which I haven’t read yet, is called *Becoming Wise*. She says wisdom is hard to define, but one of its qualities is joining inner life with our outer presence in the world. Joining inner life with our outer presence in the world. Interviewing her, Michel Martin reads this from the book: “my work has shown me that spiritual geniuses of the everyday are everywhere. They are in the margins and do not have publicists. They are below the radar, which is broken.” Michele Martin asks her then, whether we need to turn away from the public leaders we have and look for leadership elsewhere, and she references the swell of anger that we’ve seen during the presidential campaign. Krista Tippett responds, “I think that [anger] is absolutely a good description of what's happening on the surface. But anger is what pain and fear often look like when they show themselves in public. You know, we're not great in American culture at dwelling with pain and with fear,

just letting them be in the room.” <http://www.npr.org/2016/05/01/476380463/-becoming-wise-is-a-meditation-on-meaning> She is talking about acknowledging the demons, which takes strength and clarity, which is what we learn in the practice of prayer. We are back full circle to our seers, Simeon and Anna, and to their celebration of God’s gift of Jesus, even as they perceived the soul-piercing pain that would accompany it.

The spiritual geniuses of the everyday are everywhere. The first day of the New Year is a symbol of the fact that we can choose anew how to orient ourselves. We can orient ourselves to attention, strengthening the muscle of surrender, as Bourgeault would have it, preparing ourselves to see and hear, joining our inner lives to our outer selves in the world. We can be Simeon and Anna.

Let us pray: Glory of Israel,

The coming of your son, Jesus, broke open the heavens and prepared a way for all of your children to come home to you. Give us eyes to see your miraculous spirit moving in this church and in this world. Teach us to be proclaimers of your love to the nations, for the sake of the one whose name is redemption for the peoples, Jesus Christ our salvation. Amen.