

VITAL SIGNS *of* FAITH

Finding Health
in Your
Spiritual Life

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This book is dedicated to
Dr. Chris Carroll, my husband,
who has taught me about
health of body, mind, and spirit.

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Preface

I walked into my parents' bedroom one evening to tell them that I felt God calling me to become a priest. As former Hindus turned Episcopalians, they still slept on a mattress on the floor as the Hindus did. I was 19 years old.

I have a terrible long-term memory, but I remember this moment as if it were yesterday.

I was gazing at their dresser. A strange vision came into my mind. I pictured standing on a rock in a vast body of water. As the tide began to rise, I was going to have to jump from rock to rock to survive. Somehow, instinctively, I understood that I would be able to serve in these beautiful churches, but I would have to jump from one to the other as the rising tide of secularism began to sweep people away. I would have time to be a priest as the church was gently submerging and becoming something entirely new. I would be running out of time.

As a child, I made up a game called "The Ship Game." It was similar in nature to my vision. My friends and I pretended that we were on a ship and the water was rising. We could jump to a small island or a rock from our boat and then back again. We put pillows all over the floor and leaped from one to the other. But if we touched the water, we died. Sometimes we upgraded the water to lava. It was fun.



As a Gen-X child whose parents raised me in the shadow of the Cold War and who built a bomb shelter in their basement, it's no wonder I thought that life as I knew it might end. I think I pretended to jump from pillow to pillow in my living room to express the anxiety that lived inside me. The world was changing rapidly. Could I keep up with the change? How would people and institutions change? As I grew and discerned a call to the priesthood, the question haunted me: in the face of this changing world, would the church adapt and grow?

We do not understand the magnitude of the historic transition that consumes us. The arrival of technology and the ability to communicate across the planet in seconds is altering our minds. Our brains are in a period of adjustment that causes great anxiety, depression, and a constant state of restlessness. We are evolving—as the waters rise above our heads, our very nature is changing. We will soon be submerged into a new kind of interconnected world where technology integrates into every aspect of our lives. We will be living in communion with computers.

Over the course of history, new inventions have changed the landscape of our lives and of our churches. When the printing press was invented around 1436, the church in the Western Hemisphere was altered forever. People began to read the Bible in their own language, and when they read about Jesus walking around as a poor man, they began to wonder why the church was so rich. The resulting Reformation and Counter-Reformation were painful and

bloody, but the impetus was genuine and truthful—we had strayed from the way of Jesus.

Today, I am a long way from that young woman who first discerned God’s call to ministry. But my vision has held true. As the tide of change rises, I have had to jump from rock to rock, learning and leading congregations into this new way of being. I now serve as dean of a cathedral in Jacksonville, Florida. Sometimes I watch the faces of strangers who walk into the cathedral for the first time. They are struck by the beauty of the sanctuary, the way the light streams the stories of Jesus’s life through stained-glass windows, how the music elevates the soul to new heights. They watch as the altar party processes down the aisle in robes and carrying candles, and it is all fascinating. It is art. But many have not grown up in a church tradition, and they don’t know the reasoning behind each movement. They don’t resonate with the cadence of the ancient words that those of us who grew up in the church have spoken repeatedly, for our entire lives. The service seems long and rather incomprehensible to them. They wonder what it has to do with Jesus. They are drawn to the mystery and pageantry and see the worship and buildings as beautiful and fascinating pieces of art. But they don’t attend worship regularly and wonder if this is where they belong. They are without root.

The first Christians huddled together in their homes and shared a meal together. Over the meal, they remembered Jesus and how he gave his life so that they could live



eternally. They shared bread and wine and believed that these became his body and blood. This simple act of sharing a meal became so sacred that they eventually built beautiful cathedrals to house that meal, and they composed profound music to express their gratitude. Still, even the height of beauty could not capture its essence. They could not have foreseen how that same beauty would at times become an idol. They could not have foreseen how their simple meal at home could evolve into a ritual whose execution would threaten to become more important than the message itself if they were not diligent and disciplined and very, very careful.

Each year, I look at our budget. We are a lively and thriving cathedral in the core of the city of Jacksonville. People are incredibly faithful and generous, and yet, our facility is so expensive that each year I pray we will have enough money to minister and keep up the maintenance. And in the years to come, will it be enough?

Across the country, smaller churches are closing their doors. Churches across the United States and Europe are sitting empty or becoming museums, restaurants, and apartments. The Episcopal cathedral in Rhode Island is now a museum. We have closed numerous churches in Florida, but we don't talk about it much. I suppose we feel like failures, forgetting that our Lord died for us and maybe we, too, must die in order to live.

As the water rises and the smaller rocks are covered by the tide, I look to the great cathedrals. Will the tide of secularism cover them too? The pandemic has birthed virtual worship and online communities. Are they to last into the future?

There is a beautiful poem written by Carol Bialock, RSCJ:

*I built my house by the sea.
Not on the sands, mind you;
Not on the shifting sand.
And I built it of rock.
A strong house
by a strong sea.
And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.
Good neighbors.
Not that we spoke much.
We met in silences.
Respectful, keeping our distance,
but looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.
Always, the fence of sand our barrier,
always, the sand between.
And then one day,
—and I still don't know how it happened—
the sea came.
Without warning.
Without welcome, even.
Not sudden and swift, but a shifting across the sand
like wine,*



less like the flow of water than the flow of blood.

Slow, but coming.

Slow, but flowing like an open wound.

*And I thought of flight and I thought of drowning
and I thought of death.*

*And while I thought the sea crept higher, till it
reached my door.*

*And I knew then, there was neither flight, nor death,
nor drowning.*

*That when the sea comes calling you stop being
Neighbors*

Well acquainted, friendly-at-a-distance, neighbors

And you give your house for a coral castle,

And you learn to breathe underwater.

We are becoming submerged in a new kind of reality, one in which technology shapes our minds. But we can learn to breathe underwater. The breath of God, the Holy Spirit, will find us amidst the chaos of this new age. We will, once more, be reborn of water and the spirit.

We must find it again—the essence of our life together, the things that keep us alive—and, taking a deep breath, step into the water.

Introduction

Years ago, I went dogsledding with my youngest son in the Yukon. The temperature was 38 below zero. Max, an incredibly strong outdoorsman, kept looking behind to check on me as we rode our dogsleds single file. I think he was afraid that I would fall or, worse, let go of the dogsled, but I held on.

I learned from Max that when the body is very cold, you should focus on the heart. Keep your core warm, he said. Focus on your heart and your breath.

As the waters of secularism rise, I want us Christians to take this simple advice and focus on our vital signs. What is our heartbeat? What do we want to take with us into the new age? What should we leave behind?

I try to get a check-up each year. Each year, my doctor discusses various issues with me. She asks me if I am exercising regularly. How is my diet? She tells me that as a middle-aged woman I need to lift weights because my bones are beginning to decline (she uses much more impressive language like impending osteopenia). She talks about the coming of menopause, checking for breast cancer and other issues. It is a detailed exam, and I am grateful for her thoroughness. I am truly blessed to have medical care.

Why do we not examine our spiritual health with the same intention? I believe it is time for faith leaders to provide



our people with ways to measure, nurture, and develop the life of the spirit. Just as we care for our bodies, so we must learn to care for our hearts, minds, and souls. The physical life and the spiritual life are both vital. One influences and impacts the other. Why do we spend time on our bodies alone and not also on our souls?

After 25 years of struggle, my marriage failed. I had to start a new life as a single woman. I had only lived alone for one year after college before marriage. I had never made my own budget, paid my bills, or filed my own taxes. Here I was, the dean of a cathedral, managing a budget of more than \$2 million, and I had never run my own household. I felt like a very strange over-aged child. I thought I would be alone for the rest of my life—well, not alone. I would be married to Jesus.

I announced my divorce on Facebook. As a public figure, I thought it best to get the news out there in my own words before people heard through grapevines and phone calls. To my great surprise, my first kiss from high school sent me a message. He, too, was recently divorced. He is a doctor living in Connecticut. We began to talk.

Months later, we arranged to meet in person. It had been 31 years since I had seen him. We fell in love. God amazes me sometimes—well, a lot of times.

So, I found myself in a significant, long-distant relationship with a doctor. He began to speak to me about his work, and it occurred to me how similar we are. Chris looks after

the physical health of a person (specifically children as a pediatric intensivist), and I look after the spiritual health of a person. If Chris were walking down a street and found someone lying on the ground unconscious, his first step would be to check the four vital signs.

1. Is the person breathing?
2. Does the person have a pulse?
3. What is their temperature?
4. What is their blood pressure?

From these four basic pieces of information, Chris would then begin to go deeper and try to address whatever ails the person. It is from these simple vital signs that all treatment begins.

Wellness begins with the simple principle of truth-telling. We must look at where we are, describe our spiritual health, and then strive to care for, maintain, and improve that health. We begin to care for ourselves by taking our vital signs.

But what are the vital signs of the spiritual life? There are four vital signs in the physical life, and four gospels (four ways of telling the story of Jesus), so I believe that it is beneficial to speak of four vital signs in the spiritual life as well. These four vital signs happen to all begin with the letter G, so I have come to call them “The Four Gs.” The alliteration makes it easier to remember them, and in the age of the sound bite, brevity is important.



The four vital signs are as follows:

1. GOD: *The Breath*

The word for God in Hebrew, *Yahweh*, literally sounds like a breath. It is as if the ancient Hebrews believed that when we breathe, we are saying the name of God. And so, the first vital sign of the spiritual life must focus on the Creator and our relationship with the one who made us.

Do you spend time with God? Do you pray? Do you worship? The time you spend in devotion is the first vital sign of the spiritual life. And yes, this is measurable. You can measure your minutes, seconds, perhaps hours—the time you give to God. You can measure your full and undivided attention, however long you chose to give it to God. Your attention is valuable; just ask the marketers. How much of your undivided attention do you give to God?

2. GIVE: *The Pulse*

Just as oxygen flows to the heart as we breathe, helping the heart to beat, so time spent with God naturally causes the activity of thankful giving. Do you serve God by giving your time in some way? Do you seek justice, feed the hungry, listen to those in need? Do you give money? Is it sacrificial giving? Giving of both time and money can be measured as well, and this measurement is the second vital sign of the spiritual life.

3. GROW: The Temperature

Measuring the temperature of a physical body tells the doctor if the person is failing to thrive or battling illness. Healthy temperature is a delicate balance of the right amount of activity for the cells of the body. Temperature is caused by the movement of the cells within the body.

In the spiritual life, a person must learn and grow—must move toward God—to be healthy and alive. Are you learning, reflecting, studying, asking questions? If Christ is alive within you, then your life will be in constant motion. Growth can be measured by engagement. Are you reading scripture and studying your faith tradition? Are you actively learning in your field and in other areas? Are you seeking to become a better person?

Growth is the most difficult vital sign to measure for it is unique to each person. One way to measure growth is simply to measure your engagement with new ideas: books, classes, videos, podcasts. Are you open to learning?

4. GROUP: The Pressure

If your heart is working well and the veins and arteries are not clogged or obstructed, then you should have a healthy blood pressure. The pressure needs to be within a specific range, not too high or too low. Taking blood pressure is a way of measuring a body's physical health. Meeting with a group is similar—it is a tool for measuring spiritual health.



To discern God's will in our lives, we must meet regularly to share our lives with others. We cannot follow Christ alone. Remember that Jesus had a group of disciples. He did this to show us how to walk in this way. It is impossible for one person to discern God's will without the help of others. Just as the blood pressure must be a balanced number, so this group of believers must achieve a delicate balance of love, support, and confidentiality. The group cannot have too few people or too many. This spiritual vital sign is often overlooked, but like the others, it is critical for a balanced, healthy spiritual life. And it is easily measured. Are you meeting weekly with your group? Are you listening and praying for each other?



In evaluating these four vital signs of faith, we can measure the practices that will support and nurture our spiritual health, just as we would measure the vital signs of the body. It is time for us to have access to these tools of the spiritual life so that we may care for ourselves and strengthen our relationship with God.

GOD

The Breath



The mysterious name for God in the Hebrew Scriptures is given in answer to a question from Moses. Moses asks God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ What shall I say to them?” (Exodus 3:13).

And God answers: *I AM WHO I AM* (Exodus 3:14).

The name in Hebrew is *Yahweh*, but we have no idea how it was pronounced at the time. Many Jews to this day do not utter this name for it is considered too powerful, too holy, so they use the Hebrew word *Adonai*, which means Lord.

The word *Yahweh* sounds a lot like our breath. It is two syllables that come into and go out of the lungs with the air. Could God have been indicating to us that every time we breathe, we are saying the name of the one who created us?



The first vital sign of the spiritual life begins with an acknowledgment that God is as close to us as our own breath. We need to get to know the one who made us and who breathes in and through us. We do this by spending time with God in both prayer and worship. To pray is to awaken a relationship that is already there. It is to acknowledge the deepest kind of love that made us and sustains us.

It is the Trinity, the understanding of God as three in one and one in three, that also points us in the direction of breath and of the flow of air in and out of our bodies. In his book, *Trinity: The Soul of Creation*, Richard Rohr describes the Trinity as three buckets on a moving water wheel, similar to those you might see in Europe. As the wheel turns, each bucket dumps the water, then swings back to be refilled. Rohr writes that many of us aren't willing to take such risks because we're not certain that we will be refilled. But that's not the case with the Trinity, each pouring out and refilling one another, an infinite outpouring and infinite inpouring.

God is a pouring out and a returning. The first vital sign of the spirit simply asks us to track how often and for how long we "stand under the flow," as Richard Rohr describes it. How often do you turn your attention to that outpouring of love? Just as air enters our bodies and then leaves, so we must learn to pray by giving and receiving in a dance with God. To pray and worship, to spend time with God: these are the first steps in developing a life of the spirit. We can

measure this first vital sign in terms of time. How often and for how long do you give God your attention in either prayer or worship? Measure the time as you would measure the breath in and out of the body. Make sure that you are breathing enough, for our relationship with God, like all relationships, takes time.

SAMPLE



What is prayer?

Theologian and author Martin Laird writes in his book, *Sunlit Absence*, that the “reason for our ignorance of the most obvious and simplest of facts about our spiritual life is the constant inner noise and chatter that creates and sustains the illusion of being separate from God, who, as Saint Augustine reminds us, is already, ‘closer to me than I am to myself.’”

I have a relatively new vacuum cleaner. It is light and easy to carry, which makes me want to clean more (well, not that much more). But even after just a year and a half of use, it has gotten clogged. It doesn't suction the way that it should, so I took it apart this morning. Yuck. I pulled out lots of dirt and dog hair. Now it works better.

Prayer is more of an unclogging than it is anything else. God adores you and is communicating with you all the time, but, as pure love, God is like light. That light shines onto us constantly, like the sun, but we block it with our confusing thoughts and distracted minds. We block the light with years of habits and obsessions and busyness. True prayer is less about the big list of needs or wants that we want to send to God and more of an unclogging so that the communication can flow between us as it was always meant to do.

Prayer happens when we become conscious of the relationship we have with God. We don't really have to

invite God into our lives as God is already there. Prayer just acknowledges that eternal presence. Prayer happens when we awaken to what is already there and begin to interact with the divine reality within and around us. Prayer is when we get stuff out of the way enough to realize that God is there waiting for us.

An Indigenous shaman sits cross-legged out in a field as the sun is setting and feels the cool air as the sun sets. She listens to the sounds of the animals and the birds, the smells of the changing of a season. She feels the solid earth beneath her body. This is prayer.

The Jewish rabbi stands at the Wailing Wall. He wears what some consider strange clothes with strings dangling from his sides. Long curls of hair escape from his yarmulke. He sways, closing his eyes and murmuring. He asks for the salvation of the whole world and of his people. He remembers the ancient story of Israel. This is prayer.

An elderly woman sits at a potter's wheel. Silently she molds the clay as the wheel turns. Her fingers shape the mound, a smooth flowing bowl takes shape. She lets her imagination run and closes her eyes. What does the clay feel like in her hands? What is the shape that is emerging? This is prayer.

An elderly gentleman digs with his hands in rich soil. There he plants a bulb that he hopes will emerge from the ground when the spring approaches. He is lost in concentration, picturing the beautiful flowers that will



grow when the snow melts. He feels the chill autumn air; his hands have felt this soil for many years. This is prayer.

There are as many kinds of prayer as there are individuals in this world. Many people don't even realize that they are praying. Art can be prayer. Depth of relationship can be prayer. Walking in nature can be prayer. Music can be prayer; dancing, painting, and even vacuuming can become prayer. What makes it prayer? These activities and others become prayer when there's an open channel of communication, an open heart, a way for God to enter and engage with us. Prayer is a state of awareness.

Yet for all the different types of prayer, there is only one way to begin to pray. Begin by realizing that God has always been there, loving you and patiently waiting for you to awaken to her presence. Wake up. God is here. God has always been here. See, introduce yourself.

The best kind of prayer is a conscious encounter. Think about what you do when you spend time with another person. You sit down for a meal, talk to them, take walks with them; you listen to them, look them in the eye, and give them your attention. You read what they have written and listen to their music. You dance to their songs and rest in their love. Prayer is simply turning your full attention to God. It is giving God the gift of your attention.

Find out how your mind would best receive God's presence. When are you most awake? In the morning? At night? When

is your mind alert? Do you love to sing or paint or walk or read or write or dance? What makes your heart sing, and how can you bring God with you to join you in the things that you love to do most? Prayer is best begun where you love to be. Make a beautiful space in your home. Find the best coffee, a comfy chair, a window to look out, a piano to play. Whatever makes your heart sing, go there. That is where prayer begins.

Start slowly and gently and give yourself lots of room for mistakes. There are no shoulds allowed. Give your mind the freedom to jump around like a monkey. Don't get discouraged by your own ability to be distracted. The hardest part of prayer is being bound by our own limitations. Simply put, we disappoint ourselves, and we often give up rather than admit that we are frail, distracted creatures. We cannot experience God without first having to face our own inadequacies. The only person that stands between you and God is yourself. Love your broken self. Start there, and you have a chance.

Prayer is enriched profoundly when you give God your time each day, every day. Breathe in. Breathe out. Give God ten minutes, twenty minutes. Devote this time solely to God. Within the framework of a set period, let your heart lead you. Do you want to paint God a picture? Do you want to say something in writing to God? Do you want to stare at a flower or a tree or a picture of someone you are grateful for? Do you want to light a candle? Devote this time to God and see what happens. But you must do this daily, for



several months at the very least. Your mind needs time to quiet and make room for God. Give yourself the benefit of the doubt. Give yourself guilt-free time, free of scolding or criticism. Be patient. Breathe.

One of the greatest enemies of prayer is not distraction: it is guilt. Do not shame yourself or make yourself feel inadequate. Any attempt at prayer does in fact please God. Showing up is what's important, and even when you don't show up, God is fine. We pray because we need to pray, not because God needs us to pray. God is just fine. We are the ones who need it. And if you don't think that you need to pray, then it is not your time yet. Do not pray unless you yearn for God or for the well-being of another person. Guilt can pour acid on your prayer life, so leave it at the door. I would rather have you not pray at all than shame yourself into prayer. God loves you. And you long for God. Let that longing lead you into freely choosing God.

Preparing your mind

To prepare you to enter silence, I want to spend some time focusing on the warfare that goes on in the human mind. I call it warfare because voices of shame and self-criticism wage battles within every human being. We do ourselves a disservice if we simply call these thoughts and impulses things like anxiety, depression, fear. These psychological terms are accurate, but they are ultimately inadequate because they do not do justice to the fact that these

thoughts *do not belong* to us. These impulses, feelings, and thoughts come from *outside of* us. They are not part of the person that God created us to be. Often, they come from childhood trauma, destructive cultural influences, conflict, and danger. They are much less present in a well-loved and protected child. But this world is so broken that one cannot live in it without experiencing pain and fear. With this understanding, I call these destructive thoughts and feelings “demons.” It is a demon who tells the alcoholic to drink. Yes, alcoholism is an addiction, a disease. But I also see it as a demon. What other word is adequate for a repetitive impulse that tries to kill a human being with alcohol?

I consider suicidal thoughts as demons. The person who hears them must battle these destructive thoughts. It is imperative that the person who hears these destructive thoughts and impulses understands that they do not belong to them, and they are not to blame for having these thoughts. These demon suicide thoughts should be identified as an enemy, and any feelings of shame associated with having them should be let go.

It is important to seek professional help with these challenges as well as to claim the power and authority that we each have to tell the demon(s) to get lost in the name of Jesus. We all have demons, and we all must learn to cast them away. That is the job of everyone who loves God: to cast aside the darkness and put on the armor of light.



For Practice



Begin by reflecting on these questions. You may want to write down your answers in a journal or private place.

1. Do you have thoughts that tell you that you are ugly, stupid, a failure?
2. Do you berate yourself?
3. Do you have thoughts that repeat themselves?
4. Write down these thoughts verbatim. Come to know their voices. Name them for what they are and then cast them aside. That is the gift of prayer, to clean the mind like we would clean a dirty room and to make it ready to receive the Holy One.

Ways to pray

Prayer is the breath of the spiritual life. Without spending time with the divine, there can be no real relationship. Our first step is to start by finding ways to simply be in the presence of God. Begin by pondering these questions: Do you spend time with God in any way at all? What time do you spend? What time could you devote to God? Start simply.

For Practice

As you read the following sections, consider which kinds of prayer appeal to you. What gives you life? What makes you want to take a deep breath and dive in? What kind of prayer feels life-giving to you?

Centering prayer

One of the most profound kinds of prayer is found in silence, in the simple act of listening to God. The art and practice of centering prayer, or silent prayer, is rigorous and takes great discipline, for the North American mind is trained to be overly active and incessantly talkative. The only way to explore the gift of silence is to allow repetitive worries, distractions, and chats inside our minds simply wash over us. We must wait for them to wear themselves



out; we must allow them to swirl around us and then wade through them. We cannot forcefully shut down the mind in a way that won't numb us to God's presence, so we must tolerate the mind's jumping and dancing until eventually, it tires or pauses or rests for a moment.

When the prophet Elijah came to the mountain, he was looking for God. He sat in a cave and waited. Great events of nature came to him in wind and fire, and he did not find God in them. Elijah found God *in the still small voice*, or so it was translated from the Hebrew into the King James English. But the translation, like so many translations, butchered the rich and vast meaning of the original Hebrew. When I was in seminary, my Old Testament professor had a new translation for these Hebrew words. He chose the phrase: *eloquent silence*. Once I heard these words, they rang out like a bell in my soul. Of course, Elijah found the presence of God in eloquent silence! That sounds right.

A lot of prayer has to do with trusting ourselves. You are the only one who can experience the movement within your own mind. Only you can know the sound of the voice of love within your mind and distinguish it from the sound of worry or criticism or just factual knowledge. Only you can find the myriad of ways that your mind seeks rest, the traumas it processes, the wisdom it has absorbed. Only you know the different aspects of your mind: the creative side, the worrying mind, the stressed mind. One reason many of us avoid prayer is that we cannot pray without running straight into our own minds and selves. To begin to pray is first to

discover our own complexity and inadequacy and then to move beyond that in love. That is why the church talks so much about sin—not because humans are bad in any way. We are good. God said so at the beginning of creation. But sin means that we miss the mark. We are distracted, misled, confused. Once we acknowledge that we are distracted creatures of God, we receive the grace to love ourselves. Sin is just a way of naming our brokenness and learning to accept it.

You cannot pray if you don't want to know yourself. God loves you and calls you inward so that you can then move outward into the world. That is why Jesus, immediately after his baptism, goes out into the desert to pray. And when he is in the desert, scripture is clear that Jesus is tempted by Satan. He hears evil. He is tempted to make food for himself, to worship power, to defy God. Even Jesus is tempted! So why should we be ashamed of our crazy, destructive, lustful, bizarre thoughts? Thoughts don't belong to us, and they don't define us. Even when Eve was free of sin, she was tempted. Temptation happens. It is part of the created order, present even in Eden.

It is important to recognize that Jesus doesn't begin his public ministry until he knows the inner workings of his own mind and faces the temptations of the devil. Only once he comes to an awareness of the nature of his distraction does he emerge to do the work of God. Only after he dismisses the devil can he become the fullness of who God calls him to be. So, we too must navigate and ultimately learn to



maneuver past our temptations so that we can fully engage with God. Prayer must come before and during all things. And we cannot pray without confronting our own complex and broken and beautiful minds.

Centering prayer adopts the practice of silence head on. By sitting still, we come face to face with our distractions, temptations, and eventually, as the mind begins to rest, we encounter the presence of the Eternal One. The first step in centering prayer is to find a word. This word must come from the depths of your heart. It should evoke trust, vulnerability, and holiness. It is your own personal word, uttered in the privacy of your mind. It can be used to call the mind back to the center when the mind inevitably wanders. Once you choose a word or phrase, don't second-guess it. The choice of the word is not important; what is important is that you stick with it and try to move more deeply into love with each utterance. One of the first ways the mind may choose to distract is to question the validity of the word itself. Such is worry. It will latch on to whatever is placed before it.

Centering prayer is simply creating silence and protected time for the presence of the holy to become felt and known. But it is one of the most demanding kinds of prayer because it lays us bare in a time when the human mind is used to stimulation. The mind will rebel at first. It will kick and scream and think of every reason why we need to cut the prayer time short and do something else. This

temptation will never leave you, so you must come up with an ironclad method of accountability. You cannot battle this kind of temptation without the motivation of others who will support you as well as hold you accountable. Gather a small group of prayer practitioners to talk with weekly. Tell them how your practice is going. If a group doesn't work, then make yourself accountable to at least other human beings. You cannot do this by yourself. Just ask anyone who battles alcoholism or addiction, for they know what it is to battle temptation. You need your group and your sponsor. We can't do this battle alone. Our minds are addicted to distraction. There is no way to do this alone.

The darkness will not rest until you start praying so find a way to approach this practice with seriousness, rigor, and commitment. This is no joke. It is a battle for your heart and mind. And just as the devil tempted Jesus, so you will be tempted. Every kind of excuse and self-hatred will enter your mind, not just at first but every time you sit down. The devil would much rather have you busy, distracted, and spinning in circles than see you talk with God, listen to your thoughts, and reflect on your life. Centering prayer may look passive, but it is one of the most active things that you can do with your life. To pray in silence is to acknowledge the battle for your attention and time. Centering prayer looks that battle in the face and helps you take the first step to loving yourself anyway.

