

**The Garrison Institute Presents: The Common Good Podcast Transcript
Cynthia Bourgeault and David Frenette: Centering Prayer and Nondual Consciousness (Episode 19)**

[Please note: Although the transcript is largely accurate, in some cases it may be incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription software errors.]

[00:00:00] **Cynthia:** What we do is we set up the playing field so that there is this sense of interiority inside eye, and then I project myself an eye on the inside interrelationship with objects on the outside. So it's subject object relationship. That's what duality means. And non-duality doesn't mean just having a happy inclusive view about anything.

[00:00:28] It really is much more hardcore than that. It's the capacity to be able to see without that continuous translator mechanism in us so that we just see what is as it is in itself, not what is as reflected through my own experience.

[00:00:59] **Steve Varley:** Welcome to the Garrison Institute, presents the Common Good. I'm Steve Varley, managing director here, and today's episode features a conversation recorded here at our retreat Sanctuary on the Hudson River. If you're a regular listener, you're used to hearing our co-founder Jonathan FP Rose, guiding these conversations from time to time, though I have the privilege of stepping in and sitting down with some of these remarkable teachers and practitioners who gather in this place, and we explore what it means to live with depth, awareness, and care in a complicated world.

[00:01:36] This conversation is very much in that spirit. I'm joined today by Cynthia Borer and David Fett. Two deeply respected teachers in the Christian contemplative tradition, longtime peers and students of Father Thomas Keating. Their work, especially through the practice of centering prayer, has helped bring ancient contemplative wisdom into a modern context and invites us into a way of seeing and being that moves beyond usual habits of mind.

[00:02:06] This conversation explores consciousness and something called non-dual perception, sacred nothingness, and what contemplative practice might offer, a world that is feeling increasingly fragmented. We also talk about how these practices don't pull us away from life, but really instead, reshape how we show up in it, in community, in service, and in the face of uncertainty.

[00:02:32] I'm really grateful to share this conversation with you.

[00:02:54] So, Cynthia, you've got this title and description of your own work and your own self as a modern day mystic, which is such a striking title. And I want to go back though to the early days of your work and your contemplative practice where you moved through a specific door and your contemplative practice and experience became really central to your teaching.

[00:03:21] And who you, who you were and what was that door and what was it a sudden thing or more of a gradual unfurling.

[00:03:29] **Cynthia:** Well, I would say there was a never a time when I didn't know what actually would become the heart of my contemplative practice. That I was very, very lucky when I was a young child to, uh, have grown up in southeastern Pennsylvania.

[00:03:46] The cradle of Quaker is in the USA and my parents sent me to a Quaker school and part of the educational program there was every week, all 65 or so of us kids age five to 12 would troop into the old beating house and simply sit in the silence, convening our hearts and minds and intuiting with the Holy Spirit until speaking began.

[00:04:13] So I knew from the start this deep acknowledgement of spirit of something deeper than our human minds of waiting for it out of collectively sinking to it. Sinking IE synchronizing, but sinking also is sinking into it. So that was part of my childhood. And of course, during the course of high school and development and preparation for the future and career tracks, that recedes into the backdrop and I missed its absence over the years and, uh, kept finding ways to get close to the hymn of it.

[00:04:49] When I went back and started associating with Benedictine monasteries and retreats, I found a place where that kind of practice was again. Being, uh, offered. And it was through that that I found my way to Thomas skating in considering prayer. And, uh, when I first sat down to do sing prayer in a group, it was like boom, 60 years of my life dropped away and I was right back at Quaker beating.

[00:05:15] Mm. And I said, AHA. Mm. So there was a continuity that I never went too far away from the well.

[00:05:22] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm.

[00:05:22] **Cynthia:** And it was recognizing something that had been mildly with me all along, but had sort of gone stale.

[00:05:29] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm.

[00:05:29] **Cynthia:** And centering prayer gave me a means to bring it back and acknowledge it and take it further in my own life.

[00:05:38] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm. David, my, um. Sense and understanding is that your experience with centering prayer really came from your early Buddhist practice and that you moved through this different journey. That is such an interesting path because many of the people that I know have taken a journey from an early Christian practice into a Buddhist or meditation practice.

[00:06:04] But you've went the other way. And what was that like, and what did you find in centering prayer and Father Keating that you hadn't already found in your, in your Buddhist experience?

[00:06:16] **David:** When I was young, when I was an undergraduate, I got seriously into daily meditation with Zen meditation and there Soto practice.

[00:06:26] And there is something very appealing to me about that because there wasn't a re didn't have to believe much, there wasn't a requirement or, uh, uh, to have a certain orientation towards dogma or belief or a personal God obviously. So it was very appealing to me as a, uh, someone who never had any religious upbringing.

[00:06:49] I was secular baby of the suburbs. And, uh, in the midst of my Zen practice, uh, I kind of awakened to something else, some other kind of experience. I remember once I was, uh, in, uh. In college, living at my parents' house, in an apartment downstairs from them. And I had done my practice, it was December, and I came upstairs to see the family and they were all gathered around the television set watching a Charlie Brown Christmas, uh, a cartoon celebration of the meaning of Christmas that was broadcast back then.

[00:07:29] And I was just standing in the back of the room. And there's a point in that broadcast where one of the characters lioness comes out and reads a passage from Luke's gospel about the coming of God into the world, the true meaning of Christmas. And I felt this deep touch of. Presence and love coming into my consciousness, which had been emptied and cleared by my practice of Zen, Zen in the basement.

[00:07:58] Now into this empty openness was this presence that was drawing me into, uh, love and further into emptiness, empty presence. It was very confusing to me, but that was a descriptive of that era of my life where I was seriously practicing Zen. I moved to Berkeley, California to be with, uh, uh, Zen community and, um, learned about centering prayer through books, uh, Thomas Keating's early books, basil Pennington's First Book on centering Prayer, and my practice gradually shifted to centering prayer, which.

[00:08:37] Includes presence and vast emptying kenosis like Cynthia describes so well. The self emptying, that's part of centering prayer, but also this, uh, sense of opening up to the divine presence in me, in all of us and in the whole world. I had quite a struggle with that understanding of conversion and, and the, uh, tradition that was associated with the mystical path that I was opening to.

[00:09:08] Uh, at that time it was a, became a practicing Catholic. It was all quite confusing, but it was, uh, it was a falling in love period of time and meaningful for me at the time.

[00:09:24] **Steve Varley:** Cynthia, you were, uh, in relationship with. Father Thomas for many decades as a student, but then really as a colleague and, and a peer. And in one of my favorite parts from your recent book is where you talk about, you would call him Father Thomas, if he called you Father Cynthia, which, which is a lot of fun.

[00:09:45] Um, what did he see in people and what did he ask of you in your learning relationship with him?

[00:09:55] **Cynthia:** Well, it's, it's very hard to say. And now sort of, uh. Several years now after his departure from the human Earth. I still ponder that. And I think that when he paid attention and when somebody engaged him that he really saw their heart, which meant at least a part of it.

[00:10:18] They saw, he saw their potential as well as he could, and he saw it with LA respect, and that capacity got stronger and stronger in him over the years. He, he saw it, of course, as we all do through our own projections, and to the extent that that's happening for anybody, it becomes less than. A hundred percent objective seeing, and I think a lot of the work that Thomas himself went through in the, in the late and astonishing personal transformations of the, you know, final part of his life was to really come to terms with that in himself.

[00:11:00] And as he did, so that initial and very profound and supportive, seeing from the heart became clearer, more radiant. And more diffusive. Mm. It, it was always quite amazing to me that for years and years and years when he was personally present at his tiring prayer intensive retreats, he would, he would have an interview with every person who was there, every retreat, and, and he set up his day.

[00:11:26] So we did him in 20 minute slots, bang, bang, bang. And you would think, what could be seen in 20 minutes?

[00:11:33] **Steve Varley:** Mm.

[00:11:33] **Cynthia:** And yet he had this remarkable gift of going right in maybe sort of. Reading the atmosphere of a person teasing forth from them. The essential thing they really wanted to say that they about naive not know what they wanted to say and, and to affirm them in their saying would, and go in there.

[00:11:54] And it wasn't just supportive. Sometimes something would come out and he would give them a firm kind of karate chop and redirect them. But he, he was able to sort of beam in, uh, on the, the, the preciousness, the integrity, the fragility of each human heart, pay attention and offer that person a path to the next.

[00:12:17] If they were willing to see it and walk it. And I think that capacity was there from the very first encounter I ever had with him. Mm-hmm. To the very last. Mm-hmm. And it only grew stronger as his own inner work continued.

[00:12:32] **Steve Varley:** That's a tremendous amount of generosity to approach people and relationship. That way.

[00:12:39] **Cynthia:** Definitely. And of course for us, Thomas and I, as we gradually got to know each other and realized that our, our gradually our, our relationship was going to morph from, from a sort of student sitting at the feet of the teacher to what the, my Jewish friends call the Ezra Canto, which is the, the bitchy wife who's the sparring partner.

[00:13:03] And you call the questions on each other. And we did a lot of work together to essentially bring each other and call the question on each other and force each other to, to a deeper level of clarity. So we had a long time in our relationship that was in that. Middle ground. And when I say colleague, uh, I think that's, that's highfalutin, you know?

[00:13:27] Mm-hmm. I never became Thomas Keating's colleague, but we were able with this unusual and gifted kind of honesty to call the question on each other and hold each other accountable to our own, uh, deepest commitment to the path with integrity, but no nonsense.

[00:13:46] **Steve Varley:** Hmm. David, your friendship and relationship with Father Thomas was also for many decades, and you lived, uh, in a state of really monastically with, with him for some time.

[00:13:59] And there's a different intimacy to that than a lot of people experienced. The student teacher relationship is special, but living alongside somebody and really seeing that person was also probably special. And what, what did you see in that relationship that really illuminated his work and his practice in a different way?

[00:14:24] **David:** So after I had this conversion, this awakening, I did pursue a sense of having a teacher. And I met him and, uh, talked with him about becoming a monk. I never felt drawn to the permanency of the monastic cloister. Mm-hmm. And he recognized that and he said, listen, you should do some intensive retreats. Uh, and I'm doing one in, in a couple weeks.

[00:14:50] Come on to that. Uh, at the Llama Foundation in New Mexico was a pivotal and, um. Uh, watershed moment for him in his teaching to work with laypeople outside the monastery. And after that, uh, I still felt drawn to a lifestyle that was more contemplative than I could put together on my own living in the world, living in Berkeley, California.

[00:15:16] Mm-hmm. So, um, he, uh, and, uh, Mary Murkowski and a few others, uh, we all put our effort into creating a little retreat community based on centering prayer, like a little ashram with a core group of 3, 4, 5 people. And, uh, we took, uh, retreats of up to 25 and it was actually located about, uh, an hour west of Garrison in the Hudson River Valley.

[00:15:45] But I want to clarify, he didn't actually live there. He was our spiritual father, our Abba, we all took a commitment to his wisdom and his discernment and to his teaching. And that was when he was traveling a lot to New York. And so about every six weeks he'd come to New York, I'd pick him up at the airport, take him back to the retreat community, drive him into the, uh, upper East side, somewhere along the line to have a meeting with his sister, his mother.

[00:16:14] I got to know his old family. He lived this, uh, very gente American, uh, upbringing, the American aristocracy. And, uh, between all those early encounters with him, I got to know his heart and his presence, uh, and his ordinariness. He loved to be. He didn't want to be, uh, elevated in any particular sense of the term.

[00:16:40] The first time I ever saw him was at a talk and the, uh, uh, the host invited him after the talk ended to come down into the audience and people could get their blessing, his blessing,

you know, his formal blessing, come up one by one and get his blessing. He had nothing to do with that. He came down in the audience and shook everyone's hand and smiled and says, oh, sung, thank you so much for coming.

[00:17:06] Hmm. So that gente aristocratic hospitality that he was, uh, raised in, translated into a very human compassion, ordinary compassion with no role. Mm-hmm. No identity. And, uh, as an Abbott in the Benedict ent, Trappist monastic System, um, he was elected for life. So he had been in Abbott for about 20 years. Uh, when I met him, he could have stayed in that position for a lifetime, but he decided not to for various reasons.

[00:17:39] But as an Abbott, he was addressed as Dom DOM, which means Lord Hmm. Dom Thomas. So he had a lot of, uh, of, uh, authority and, uh. Spiritual identity that could be possible with that role, but he would have enough, none of it. He would just, uh, joke and wanna be just, uh, one of the guys. Mm-hmm. And I learned a lot from that teaching every six weeks in those early years, 10 years at that contemplative retreat center, based on his teachings and the years, uh, after that ordinary, transformative love in the moment without attachment to anything particular, any role, any identity.

[00:18:25] And as Cynthia's book explains wonderfully, he went more and more into that selflessness of not even having a spiritual identity to hang onto, but no fixed point of reference for identity at all.

[00:18:41] **Steve Varley:** Mm.

[00:18:41] **David:** And that was wonderful to see and be, uh, close to.

[00:18:46] **Steve Varley:** I want to stay with you for a second, David, and maybe transition though to a discussion around centering prayer itself as a, as a tool and a practice.

[00:18:56] And if you were to describe centering prayer to somebody who's never experienced it, and like we can outline the contours of you're sitting in silence, you have maybe a sacred word or a element that you're returning to when thoughts arise, you do it 20 minutes a day. You do it twice a day, maybe at the beginning and end of the day.

[00:19:20] And it sounds simple and very straightforward, but what is. Simple description, miss, and leave out.

[00:19:28] **David:** Well, it's, it's a good description of how to begin. The sacred word, uh, is a symbol of consent in the hallowed tradition of the cloud of unknowing, where centering prayer finds most of its inspiration in the Christian mystical teaching, uh, teaching from the Middle Ages, uh, by an anonymous monk to have, uh.

[00:19:50] A word to return to his centering prayer says, when you're engaged with other thoughts, so like in Zen meditation, like, uh, Soto Zen meditation, where you have a posture and, uh, the breath to return to, it's a beginning entry. It's a platform to jump off from into this world of simple being.

[00:20:13] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm.

[00:20:14] **David:** That's contemplative prayer.

[00:20:15] The larger world that's centering prayer is one practice to, uh, dispose oneself to. So centering prayer has this little form, it's little structure. And then there's the wider and vast universe of contemplation, which is spacious and full and, uh, full of presence and love and, and the trinity and all these mystical, uh, ordinary, mystical truths which begin to unfold over the years.

[00:20:44] And they need to be integrated into life. So. And Buddhism particularly, I, you know, I'm a little familiar with. So, uh, a lot of the great, uh, Buddhist traditions have a, a simple entry shacha, and then there's, uh, Zog Chen, the vast spaciousness of, uh, pure presence. Centering prayer has something similar. And there's also the, the importance of having other spiritual practices to integrate that movement into vast, spacious presence of God to integrate it into life.

[00:21:19] Into the heart, into the body, into the mind, Alexio, divina, the prayer of the heart, all these other additional practices that are being renewed in addition to centering prayer. So, uh, centering prayer is a springboard. There's a, a lot of simplicity and beauty to it.

[00:21:39] **Steve Varley:** Hmm. Cynthia, you have, um, this image in your writing and in your speaking that with centering prayer, that you're really rewiring or, uh, installing a new operating system and that it makes possible your phrase and other folks have used this, but your phrase of non-dual perception, and can you just say once and for all in simple words, what, what is non-dual perception and what does, what do things look like through non-dual perception?

[00:22:14] **Cynthia:** Well, I would say that, uh. In our usual brain, the brain that we use to navigate the world, the brain we use to derive our usual sense of self. Would, I am a person, I have these qualifications, I have these characteristics, I have this personal history. Mm-hmm. All of that kind of stuff we generate about ourself is generated through a wonderful sort of pre-installed operating system in our brain that kind of kicks in as we become, you know, conscious individuals during our childhood that basically runs on a subject object dualism.

[00:22:58] And that's not a negative nasty term, it's just describing how the toilet flushes as it were. That what we do is we set up the playing field so that there is this sense of interiority inside eye. And then I project myself an eye on the inside interrelationship with objects on the outside. So it's subject object relationship.

[00:23:23] That's what duality means. And non-duality doesn't mean just having a happy, inclusive view about anything. It, it really is much more hardcore than that. It's the capacity to be able to see without that continuous translator mechanism in us, so that we just see what is as it is in itself, not what. Is as reflected through my own experience of this, and it's a long, subtle learning curve to really move across that.

[00:23:57] A lot of people think that non-duality is just paradox tolerance. It isn't. It really is a capacity to look at the world in all its radical bits and pieces. This it's, and yet feel a flowing

underlying unity to the whole thing, which is there where I, the translator self used to be. I watched this happen to Thomas Keating just brilliantly, particularly in the last 10 years of his life.

[00:24:24] Mm-hmm. Uh, it's a, it's almost the subtle peak if you want, of what a human consciousness is capable of to give itself. Back and to operate in the world without the crutch of an autonomous, you know, hypothetical self structure. So for me, where this ties in with centering prayer and the most useful and I think revolutionary instruction in the prayer, which is given to people right at the beginning in the introductory workshops, um, they say that the considering prayer is about letting go of all thoughts.

[00:25:02] And that's right there in the instruction. When you recognize that you're engaged with a thought, you let the thought go. And so it then specifies that a thought is anything that calls your attention to a focal point. And that's the radical piece in the early centering prayer, teaching a thought is not just a memory, an idea, a sort of prayer about God, a fixed form.

[00:25:30] It's whenever you notice your attention that your sort of pool of awareness is going out and fixating on an object, no matter how holy or how minuscule. If you're suddenly distracted by the buzz of the light against in the room and you start thinking about it, that sets up that dualistic configuration.

[00:25:53] And what Thomas teaches, which is I believe so revolutionary considering prayer, is that the way to get out of that is once you recognize it's happening and miraculously something in you does recognize that it's happening.

[00:26:09] **David:** Mm-hmm.

[00:26:09] **Cynthia:** That you simply drop the object. You just let go of it, just like you're letting a ball drop out of your hand in the famous Zen teachings about this.

[00:26:20] And as soon as you let go of the object for a brief time, the mind sort of falls into that sort of *zug en place* that David was alluding to. That space between the thoughts and you get to, you get to abide there for a nanosecond or two and you get to learn that it won't kill you, and that there's actually a kind of continuing consciousness that's there continuously either present or self-renewing beneath the surface of all this crazy eye motions about trying to, well, how is this for me?

[00:26:53] Am I, mm-hmm. So there is this beautiful, so simple elementary training about what is a thought. And then this training of you, you get yourself out of entanglement with this system by simply letting go, and you learn to do it during the time of prayer in by just the repeated letting go of a thought. If a thought comes back and get it, get it again, or a whole different set of them.

[00:27:20] Every time you actually practice that releasing mechanism, even if you're immediately swapped with 10 more thoughts, you're activating the beginning of the beginning of the system that can run the non-dual perception program, and you're. Activating it through your intention that just in this moment, I am going to let go of this thought and you can actually begin to feel that as a subtle body inner sensation of relaxation and opening.

[00:27:53] So gradually you are rewiring the brain through this process of letting go or kenosis as it's known in the Christian tradition as, uh, to be able to actually run to, you're installing the hardware that will eventually allow you to be able to run a program that isn't filtering everything through self and subject awareness that can live and abide out of that deeper self that actually notices.

[00:28:22] When you're engaged in a thought, it's, it's fashionable in the, in the centering prayer teaching nowadays, simply to say, when you're engaged with a thought, you return to your sacred word. But I think for a lot of people, particularly beginners, we're engaged with a thought probably 19 outta the 20 minutes in the prayer, and we don't even know it.

[00:28:41] We sleep right through it. But when something notices, we're engaged with a thought.

[00:28:48] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm.

[00:28:48] **Cynthia:** That's what you let it go. And the miracle is that something does notice and then all you have to do is obey the prompts that it's giving you. And little by little that thing that is always noticing as the hard wiring shifts is able to sort of step into the nest that you're neurologically and attitudinally creating for it there and become the deeper and more capacious self as consciousness.

[00:29:20] That can, that can run your finite being without all this ego, small self translator mechanism.

[00:29:41] **Steve Varley:** David, uh, in your writing you have used the phrase, um, sacred nothingness, and I find this, um, phrase, you know, very evocative, but it's also, it's a little scary of like, am I perceiving sacred nothingness? Am I sacred nothingness in, in this practice? What, what are you pointing at with that phrase?

[00:30:06] **David:** In the book you're referring to, I use that term along with the sacred word and the sacred breath and the sacred glance to give the mature practitioner centering prayer, hopefully a few options as their practice develops.

[00:30:21] So, uh, the sacred, no thingness nothingness is not to be reliant or, uh, in one's practice of centering prayer on the form of a word or the breath, or the glance, particularly the word to return to it. There's a possibility as centering prayer develops and it can develop pretty quickly for some people in this direction to sit and to have this turning, this inward turning.

[00:30:49] Uh. Guided by that part of oneself that Cynthia's talking about. That's done not usually in touch with that part of oneself turns and opens towards not a thing like a word, but to this no thing that that's everything. This, this, it's, it's no particular thing. And, uh, it's not, uh, necessarily God. It's just no thing to represent God.

[00:31:18] And it's, the idea is to have a kind of a friendly and a comfortable attitude towards one's practice when one's drawn in that direction, just to be, without having to hang on to the

word, without having to, uh, return to the form even the name of God, if that's one sacred word, just to be and have no thing become everything.

[00:31:42] So one of the great Christian mystics, John of the cross talked about Nada. In Spanish that was roughly translated to English as nothing, not a nada, nada. And he says There is nada on the summit of Union with God. There's no one thing because everything is there in that nada. So to have that attitude that it's not going to be an emptiness, that's one self-destruction into nothingness, but to have an adventurous attitude that, um, everything can happen in this freedom of no thingness, which is everything including God.

[00:32:26] **Cynthia:** That's such a beautiful response, David. And I would just add that this is a place where Thomas Keating went more and more powerfully and and beautifully, and hopefully during those final 10 years of his life that he has a wonderful teaching. That for many of us, we think of silence. We enter the silence as a sort of backdrop for something, you know, to hear messages from God to receive consolation.

[00:32:52] It's, it's the, you know, it's the sort of great psychological void out of which content pops and toward the it of his life very strongly. Thomas experienced the other. He would enter silence and it was alive. He called it into one of his last poems, A rising tide of silence. It had heft, it. Had dimension.

[00:33:14] And he even said at one point you could say that, that contemplation happens when silence morphs into presence. And then he went on to explain this presence. He says, you might just say it's spaciousness, you're awake. You don't know what you're awake to, but it's, you're alive. You know that it's, it's vibrant and sweet and intimate and surrounding.

[00:33:45] So he had this beautiful encounter and he used to talk about gazing on the unmanifest so he could look directly into what so many of us in the West particularly are, are sort of pre-programmed to look at as empty space. And actually see it alive as the wellspring of, you know, sort of divine outpouring.

[00:34:10] He actually talked about it toward the end of his teaching as a third dimension that is not just us shuffling along on the horizontal axis of our life, but of this wellspring of things popping out from the unmanifest into the manifest as potential as being, as creativity and giving themselves back up into it in an ongoing dance of divine generativity and dynamism.

[00:34:40] **Steve Varley:** I wanna, um, diverge a moment from, uh, my plan in this conversation and just ask you if you could help me, um, understand why it is better to experience this, um, state of oneness and to use these tools and to awaken to this. Nature of maybe true divine reality as opposed to this more, uh, classic subject object relationship where I just strive to be a virtuous, holy person, be receptive to the word of God and teachings, and it sort of a more classical orientation to Christian practice.

[00:35:25] And my specific question is how that shows up for us in being helpful to the world and doing good in the world, and understanding the ways in which we might be of service to other people.

[00:35:40] **Cynthia:** I would say that as long as we're living in our subject object dualism and our sense of selfhood generated by that, we are inherently violent and untrustworthy, that we are gonna manipulate whatever we touch because our usual subject object dualism is based on a sense of lack.

[00:36:04] 'cause we've had to split the wholeness of ourself to reach the fullness of perception. And the tool we're using to claim identity is identity by differentiation. You know, I am me because I'm not you. And as long as the church is entrusted with the teaching of Jesus, which is really coming from that non-dual place that only makes sense of it, it's going to always wind up making a mockery of that truth.

[00:36:32] By encasing it in an entitlement identification over zeal exclusion. At some point, posturing fear control, and these things are inimical. To divine grace. So to be able to touch and breathe through and see through those non-dual eyes, even for the moment sees your sense, you suddenly see how this ego self is a poor tool.

[00:37:02] You know, it, it can never carry the weight that's put on it. That, that both self and the divine are so much more expansive. And once you see that, you can see the other thing that just as you've learned considering prayer, that the way to get out of entanglement of that is to freely let go of the object.

[00:37:21] So you begin to learn to go into the gift of the smaller self with gratitude and freedom.

[00:37:28] **Steve Varley:** Hmm.

[00:37:29] **Cynthia:** I don't believe myself that we dismantle it and put it on the shelf and never use it again because it's the coin of the realm when we're working in finite form, even Jesus had to use it.

[00:37:40] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm.

[00:37:40] **Cynthia:** But it's really, really different to use something or be from being stuck in it.

[00:37:45] You know, like if you're in a symphony orchestra, you have to play your violin and you have to play it well, but when you think you are your violin, you're gonna be in trouble. So what it does is it gives us some measure so that we can freely inhabit our smaller selves without getting stuck in them or blindsided by them.

[00:38:07] **David:** And the world needs it. The world at this point in human history, human evolution needs any kind of technology or spirituality or tradition that opens from the dualistic subject object, separate self system, into something that's more unitive. So, um. Wonderfully. Uh, a year ago at Garrison when you all hosted the symposium for, on Thomas Keating's Works and Cynthia's, uh, new book.

[00:38:38] At that time I remember, uh, there was, uh, a few topics oneness, uh, in, uh. Oneself through prayer, contemplative prayer, oneness in life, oneness among the religions, certainly,

uh, centering prayer practitioners as they go more deeply into the spiritual path. Begin to see the common ground that exists among all the religious traditions still being faithful and true to their own practice.

[00:39:09] In the Christian contemplative path, father Thomas Keating, uh, and the great wisdom teachers of Christianity, uh, encourage a, a sense of dialogue with other. Religions, but recognizing the common core of oneness, but also the strength of diversity, not trying to blot out and making everything the same. The environment, our, our sense of oneness with the created world.

[00:39:33] That God's presence in us is also the animating force of everything in life. So, uh, the world needs any type of, uh, spirituality or practice that recognizes the common oneness and also moves into life to work creatively and dynamically with all the problems we're confronted with. And I, I think Cynthia's right on that these problems in the world really come from this core mistake of living according to duality subject object dualism me feeling like I'm separate from you in some way, but to see the common unity of everything as someone like Thomas Keating did more and more throughout his life is a wonderful ground for being in the world at this time of exploding separation.

[00:40:27] **Steve Varley:** Hmm. I want to stay on that for a second, Cynthia, and just ask you though, to maybe talk about practically or maybe even examples that you've seen as people have used this new expanded awareness to move their work out into the world. I, I guess I should pull back though and just ask, do we have. Are we obligated to go and be of service and help in the world in this view?

[00:41:00] And why? I mean, if, if it's all God, like, are we, are we the agents of that? How do we understand ourselves as having agency and taking right action in the world?

[00:41:13] **Cynthia:** Well, I don't think we're obligated to, because that once again, recaptures it in that old separated thinking.

[00:41:21] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm.

[00:41:21] **Cynthia:** Like, God has given us this little gift and therefore we have to go out and do this.

[00:41:26] It, it actually works much more simultaneously than that. That as the oneness infuses and becomes more than a sort of a spiritually acceptable attitude, it just overwhelms itself and it creates a do. Energy field. And in that energy field, things happen. One of the examples of that that most comes to mind for me is, uh, brother Roger from the Teza community many, many years ago, who simply was, uh, impelled by wanting to live the gospel life more fully, more, more clearly, more dearly.

[00:42:03] And I think what he was really doing from the language I've been using, is trying to, to live it from that same non-dual place that Jesus delivered the teaching from. He would never

use that language. He would've been shocked by that language, but functionally that's what happened. And the goodness of his heart led him naturally.

[00:42:23] This was during the dark days of World War ii. He was in eastern France with his little community. Switzerland was. Half an hour away over the border, Jews were being rounded up, call carte off to Auschwitz and murdered. He immediately offered his place as sanctuary. Uh, not because he had any obligation, but because a heart that sees all is one and a conscience that sees violations about that as just unbearable to the nature of the divide.

[00:42:54] Reality will move to do what you do, and sometimes as you gain strength in this capacity, you don't, it doesn't necessarily mean going out and forming a protest movement or, you know, some people have moved that way and moved beautifully. Thomas Mi Merton tended to move that way toward the end of his life with a, a call to more overt action.

[00:43:18] Mm-hmm. Some people, just as it would look like, disappear into prayer. Mm-hmm. That prayer is not prayer like we learned in churches on Sunday morning. This is a prayer that because, because hearts at that level, at the unit of level are diffusive and they radiate with non localized action and find each other, they surround the world with a profound bandwidth of the new resources of compassion and love and agency that don't come out of personal initiative.

[00:43:50] They come out of permeability to being shaped. By a collective intelligence. We, we sometimes think that God and the spiritual world and all that are just Newtonian dull objects. I mean, how can you not be divine and have a will and intelligence and intentionality stronger? You know, if that isn't true, then why are we all praying anyway?

[00:44:12] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm.

[00:44:13] **Cynthia:** So as we beg ourselves dispo at the availability to this greater, you know, vibrancy of life and unity that comes from this consciousness, it will have with us as it wishes. And that's part of the deal. And you go unf unfairly because you're already so grounded to that deep sense of abundance and wellness that that emanates up out of it.

[00:44:41] **Steve Varley:** David, your, um. Language and your practices. My sense is that's, uh, a very, the teaching is about embodying and moving that practice into this, um, integration space. And most of my questions today have sort of betrayed a subject object, sort of framing of what does it mean for me to do this practice, but I'm curious or pointing at what it might mean when.

[00:45:13] A community or a collective or a many of us are doing a practice like this together. Like how does that show up or shape what the community of practice might, might look like?

[00:45:26] **David:** Oh, well that's a wonderful, uh, observation or question. Centering prayer can be done as a solitary or even aeromedical or hermit like practice, but it's always cast in light of the broader community and the centering prayer communities of practice.

[00:45:45] Little groups, uh, in churches and 12 step context in prisons are a wonderful way to be sustained in the practice to allow the fruits of the practice to be expressed with one another. Thomas Keating used to say that God is a community. That God is a community of persons, uh, that traditionally this is called the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[00:46:10] You could say the source, the presence, and the Spirit. God is a, a group or a cohort or community of persons that lives within us, and that is the basis of the whole world. So our centering prayer practice and contemplative prayer is set in the context of God who draws us more interpersonally, uh, free within us, and, uh, a relationship of what the tradition calls divinization.

[00:46:43] We become more and more divine like God in the community of persons, so that God in me is relating and serving God and other people. The presence in me is relating to the source of everything else and other people through the spirit.

[00:47:02] **Cynthia:** Mm-hmm.

[00:47:02] **David:** And that's the way it's done in practice too. And this demonization, this gradual and slow project of becoming one with who we all already were.

[00:47:14] God in us, um, is also one which the leftovers of neurosis and problems and, uh, maybe a subtle addictiveness in the mind. You don't try to get rid of them, push them away, but they become another entry into. Communing with other people, they become the leftovers that are composted, my neuroses that are not, they don't seem to really get rid of 'em completely.

[00:47:42] Mm-hmm. Become the, the compost that's shared and recycled with other people. So I can relate with greater compassion to the other person. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Who also has their neurotic craziness, their divine nature, but also their human nature in God too. So to have those two aspects of the transformative process in mind, the divinization and the community of God's presence in us, and the humanization towards my own problems and weakness, that never seems to get fully freedom.

[00:48:14] And then my freedom is in not taking it too seriously because I'm just a human being. Father Thomas, wonderfully, he says, I'm just a work in progress. I'm just a work in progress. And he would laugh at that. I, you know, I remember seeing the Dalai Lama many times just laugh at himself. And that's the joy of freedom on the divine and the human level and the source of compassion for a world that is broken.

[00:48:44] **Steve Varley:** Cynthia, we're in the, uh, in the hours before, uh, your retreat is beginning. Um, we're to share with our listeners. We're at the Garrison Institute where this happens to be recorded on a day right before a long and really robust retreat group is gathering. We're welcoming some 130 souls aboard and, um, are gonna have some practice and teaching time.

[00:49:12] And I wonder, um. If you could talk a little bit about what it's like to explore and teach together. So you've certainly taught and wrote on your own and led many experiences, but how

are you thinking about your relationship with each other and what your strengths are and what you're gonna explore with folks versus, uh, what David will do?

[00:49:37] **Cynthia:** Well, uh, I'm very mindful of the aphorism, great minds overthink alike,

[00:49:48] and I try not to overthink this. For me, it's very, very simple that if we submit ourselves to the discipline. Of that collectivity, that transparency and believe that whatever you call it, the Holy Spirit or whatever, some higher intelligence operates through collectivities, when they allow themselves to be a vessel for the ongoing revelation of divine purpose, then that's all you have to do.

[00:50:19] **David:** Mm-hmm.

[00:50:19] **Cynthia:** Is really make a commitment. To be present in the moment because I have no idea what David's gonna toss and David has no idea what I'm gonna toss. And we, neither of us know what the group is gonna toss mm-hmm. Or what the political situation is gonna toss. Mm-hmm. You know? Mm-hmm. It, it's a wild card and it's exactly the wild card nature of it that makes it really good work.

[00:50:42] What we've done is a little bit of due diligence as much as we can. We've decided a track of things that David's gonna present. We've got a track of things that I've gotta present. We've sort of sorted out who's running sits and, uh, you know, all the business that you need to do to mm-hmm. To just kind of hold a container that's not chaos.

[00:51:00] **David:** Mm-hmm.

[00:51:00] **Cynthia:** But, but how the divine chooses to fill it, including mistakes, including places where things go dead. This is all part of the. Part of the experiment with becoming, uh, living vessels, not ai, pre-programmed feedback machines.

[00:51:17] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. David, can you talk a little bit about the relationship to, uh, teaching and silence that's happening in, in a retreat setting, and maybe what's, uh, what's on tap for, for us this week?

[00:51:34] **David:** Well on the retreat, and I've done a lot of silent retreats, uh, in service and in practice. I and Cynthia get to speak and everybody else gets to listen.

[00:51:50] We start out with a dynamic, uh, in which we're practicing together in silence, including Cynthia and I. And, uh, the silence becomes the, the seedbed for words, the word emerges out of silence. So the, our teaching emerges out of this trust in each other, Cynthia and I, that she was describing, and the dynamism of the spirit working through us in our words and our presence.

[00:52:19] You know, it's said that sometimes, uh, uh. The witness of how to drink a cup of tea is, oh, I remember Thomas Merton met, uh, Vietnamese Buddhist monk Han in the 1960s, and he described that meeting to his fellow Trappist monastics. As wonderful. He said, as you could

tell, he was in a presence of, of a monk, by the way, he closed the door, by the way, he closed the door.

[00:52:47] So that's an invitation to be present and let, uh, present speak. It's powerfully, and then use words when necessary. And that's the underlying dynamic to the, uh, flowing oneness. The oneness is silence, and the flow is word and service and action that returns to oneness. So we do have some formal teachings with the words.

[00:53:15] It's all meant to be embodied in practice, which includes silence, not as an end point, because our world is not that quiet right now, but the invitation is to integrate word and silence into, uh, presence that's functional. You don't have to hang out in a monastery or retreat center forever. But the idea is to move into life and let, uh.

[00:53:40] Let the oneness flow.

[00:53:42] **Steve Varley:** I'd love to explore that, um, with you. Just another moment, Cynthia. And, um, uh, a thing that I am struck by in both of your backgrounds and, uh, your bios is the creation of a, of a private practice space. A um, in David's case, he has a, a backyard, uh, studio shed that is described in Cynthia's case.

[00:54:07] Your bio talks about your Hermitage in Maine, and what, what are you protecting or, uh, creating in that space of a hermitage?

[00:54:18] **Cynthia:** Well, I have to say from the start that I. Distrust terms and that, I think the term Hermitage was put on by a, by publisher who was trying to sell a book. Because I, I have a particular kind of sense that, uh, that one of the easy ways of cheating is to get hold of statements, you know, of practices from the outside and then turn 'em into lifestyles and merit badges rather than going through the door of what they're opening.

[00:54:47] Hmm. So, uh, I would say I have a house in din. Hmm. And it serves all the functions that a house has. You know, that I, there's a little place to cook, there's a little outhouse to, to do the other reverse side of cooking. Mm-hmm. Uh, there's a bed to sleep. There's, uh, no laundry room or nothing. 'cause I don't have electricity in it.

[00:55:08] But it's a simple place, and it's there to really, for me to, to call me to non distracted presence. I, it's not precious or violent or sacrosanct, you know, that I, if people come in, you know, I'll h I'll serve Denver from time to time with Yes. In the Hermitage. And right down to the side is the place where the, you know, my little prayer bench sits.

[00:55:34] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm.

[00:55:34] **Cynthia:** So there's nothing sort of sacred. Like if you touch it, you've, you're bad.

[00:55:38] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

[00:55:39] **Cynthia:** But it's sturdy and flexible and it becomes a kind of, uh. Sacramental in the classic description of sacrament is as an outward, invisible side of an inner truth. And if the inner truth is not kept alive, you know, if I neglect meditation, if I don't kinda maintain and nurture that renewed commitment to quiet presence, and it doesn't always, or even normally result in mystical experience.

[00:56:06] Hmm. But very often, you know, you've sit in the cushion, I chat some psalms in the morning, I sit and do the meditation. I do a JE exercise or two sometime go out then and work with the tractor or work with a firewood, or work with the writing or whatever's on the plate for the day. But you're aware that, that that current of silence infuses and holds the work.

[00:56:30] In the outer world and in some sense ties it together. So it's not precious. You know, I detest presos, I think it's a form of spiritual arrogance and laziness. Mm-hmm. But it's just a simple, sturdy place where you do what you know has to be done and maintain integrity with what's re regenerating you at each instant.

[00:56:52] **Steve Varley:** David, how, how about you in your experience and um, uh, working with the space of being, uh, in solitude and that silence and then moving that out into daily life?

[00:57:06] **David:** Thomas Keating used to say, God is in us. God is the, uh, the sanctuary. God is the place that we come to, and that reality is an indwelling place in us.

[00:57:21] I enjoy my little tough shed in the back. My wife Donna has her prayer spot upstairs in her little office corner. We go about our activities during the day, and then we come together at night before bed and we pray together. Um, it gives us a foundation for being in the world in order to experience the second part of Thomas Keating's Simple teaching.

[00:57:46] He says, God is in us and we are in God. Not only does God this indwelling place of refuge and oneness, but the whole world is in God. This is a big view of God. So it's like the fish who's swimming in the water of the ocean and learns to discover that the ocean is around it all the time. Water is around it, uh, lives in an ocean of water.

[00:58:13] Like we live in an ocean of God, but we've gotta have a practice in order to open to that reality. Most of us for life. A sense of intentionality. So, uh, community, a place and affiliation. All these things that can be dropped and need to be dropped in terms of being, uh, forms of attachment at any time. But they can be helps along the way.

[00:58:39] Like the sacred word is a help along the way to focus one's intention and mind returning ever so gently letting go of every other, every thought that comes to mind. That's, uh, that's the part of the path that opens up.

[00:58:56] **Steve Varley:** David, as, um, you are doing this work and looking back over many decades of practice and thinking and, um, maybe non-thinking, what, what are you surprised by?

[00:59:11] Did you have a sense of the journey that you might be taking when you set out on it? Because you could see it through Father Thomas's, uh, life and work, or, or not so much?

[00:59:22] **David:** Not so much.

[00:59:23] **Steve Varley:** Hmm.

[00:59:23] **David:** I had, uh, no idea. And I think that's the, uh, best attitude to have no fixed idea, no expectation. I didn't think, oh, I'm going to become Thomas Keating.

[00:59:37] I did have this intention to be united with God in all of life.

[00:59:43] **Steve Varley:** Hmm.

[00:59:43] **David:** And see how that works itself out. I, I didn't have the intention to go into a, a long period of, of celibacy when I was 26 years old. I went into a period of like three years of retreat where I didn't want to have relationships because my primary, primary relationship was the God.

[01:00:05] And then nine more years with a community of Celibates at the retreat house I didn't have when my time expired, uh, at the retreat house. And I. Moved with the idea of going further into solitude in the deserts of southeastern Utah around Moab. I met a woman who was like as beautiful as God. I had no expectation of that.

[01:00:32] I had no expectation. A few years later when my heart was broken and into life even more fully, and then meeting Donna, my wife, who brought it all alive and ordinariness of committed life, all the turns of ordinary life become inundated with this other journey, this inward journey that brings, uh, the.

[01:00:56] Work of career and of service and of family, uh, that are on the top of life. That journey rides along the back of the spiritual journey. I have no idea about what's gonna happen tomorrow.

[01:01:10] **Steve Varley:** Hmm.

[01:01:10] **David:** We'll see.

[01:01:12] **Steve Varley:** Cynthia, I'd like to ask you a, a similar question, but to talk about what's next and what is emerging and alive for you in this work.

[01:01:23] **Cynthia:** Well, I, I'd start by saying that I, I would say a hundred percent that what David just said is how it works. Hmm. It's that you're being constantly surprised. I'm going constantly surprised my default position to manage fear. Created by uncertainty is to plan ahead.

[01:01:44] **Steve Varley:** Mm-hmm.

[01:01:45] **Cynthia:** You know, and I'm a very good planner.

[01:01:46] I think you have everything And so you lay it out in five year increments. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And as I now, uh, am hovering just on the threshold of turning 80, you know, there's a great, uh, inclination to, to say, well, let's plan what the next five years are gonna look like. Let's sort of see, you know, and you realize that's all spiritual nonsense.

[01:02:07] Mm-hmm. Because everything that has ever happened in my life that was spiritually significant, has been a total surprise, has come totally out of left field. Mm-hmm. And it's usually had to pick its way in and push its way in. Mm-hmm. Uh, through a whole sort of raft of preconceptions. You know, I laugh at David's, you know, solid fight to be a celibate for so long because you learn that this is what, this is what the real inside track of God people do, at least that this path.

[01:02:37] Mm-hmm. And then we'll wham. You knocked on your, you know, funny butt, and yet, you know it's right. And that same pattern has happened in my life at, you know, four or five of the most key turns. Everything I planned and managed turned out boring and, and defective everything that something in me just said yes to, because everything in me knew that that was the way it opened.

[01:03:02] Is, uh, where it's led and the stuff out of which by life has been built. So that sort of predisposes me as I go into the future. What's, what's really got my attention right now is the relationship between the small self and the Lord self. Because so much of the universal religious traditions have spent time demonizing the small self, and you either dismantle it or you see through its illus, or you, in other words, transcend and include it.

[01:03:35] You fold it under and as. I realized myself, uh, with a little help of, uh, gerian roadmaps that we live on array of creation, and there are many, many worlds. Jesus said in my father's house are many mansions, and they all have their forms and conditions and causalities and limits. And, and we humans in general, and contemplatives in particular, live with a foot in both worlds or dual citizenship, if you wanna call it that.

[01:04:06] You know, that we know the language of the unmanifest, we know the language of the fluid and becoming, we know the language of the nucleated and small and fearful and visionary. And from both of these worlds, a different fragrance of divine love emerges. So I'm, I'm learning how to pour from my. Larger self into my smaller self, you know, and of course your larger self is already poured as being filled by that greater divine spaciousness.

[01:04:40] But also how to pay back from my small self into my larger self by doing the work, by doing the work of seeing and, and grieving and not protecting myself, you know, and looking at, looking at even choices that I think are going in the wrong direction. I am concerned about the, the degree of, of hysteria and chaos loose the world right now.

[01:05:07] I know that something in me of conscience impels a response, but I know I can't control and manage that response, and I, uh, I just have to finally say, you know, Lord, you

know, if you want things, you know, to sort of be pulled through the eye of the needle at this point, show me. Surprise me where I'm to work.

[01:05:31] So I would say I live in maintaining the inner conditions to be surprised and to turn on a dime if I need to. If it seems in violation of all the hats I've worn for seven some decades,

[01:06:09] **Steve Varley:** I want to, um, just say as we move to a close, uh, how much of a privilege it is to sit with you in your, in your presence and to have. Uh, just a moment of depth and reflection and your, your generous sharing means a lot, Cynthia and David. So thank you. And thank you for being here at the Institute.

[01:16:34] **Steve Varley:** Well, thanks for listening to that conversation with Cynthia Borer and David Fett. Conversations like that have a way of staying with me. There's something in the way that they were speaking about silence. Letting go and learning to move beyond those usual patterns that keep working on me, gradually reorienting how I see and respond to the world.

[01:16:58] It's really important to be part of sharing these voices and the kind of inquiry that happens here at the Garrison Institute where folks gather not just to think about these questions, but to practice them together. We're grateful you're here with us. Until next time, I'm Steve Varley at the Garrison Institute.