

STAY AWAKE CENTERING PRAYER

40 Days of Centering Prayer

Ciona D. Rouse

I don't like to rise before the sun. But for Lent one year, I decided to start every morning at 5:30 so I could walk to my church and arrive when the doors opened. I had read about the contemplative practice of Centering Prayer, and I wanted to try it.

Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is a way of silencing the soul, resting in God's love, and listening for God's still, small voice. I have always loved the story in 1 Kings 19:11-13. Elijah stood on the mountain, waiting for God to pass. God was not in the powerful wind, the terrible earthquake, or the fire. Instead, after the chaos, silence fell; and God spoke to Elijah in a gentle whisper. I wanted to hear God's gentle whisper; and with my busy schedule, I needed to hear God's whisper at the crack of dawn. So I dubbed myself an early riser for forty days.

Centering Prayer involves releasing other thoughts and distractions and focusing all your attention and desire on God. If your mind wanders, you are encouraged to say a simple word to help you center again. I selected the word hope.

Distractions

The first morning, I found a room where I could sit still and pray for an hour. I did not sit still. I fidgeted. I opened my Bible. I pulled my coat over my legs because I was cold. I thought about what I would eat for breakfast. I stared at an angel figurine in the room. I took my coat off because I was warm. I rambled to God about why I couldn't be still. I picked up the Bible again and memorized scripture but got frustrated because I was not being quiet. I said "hope" a lot. I glared at the angel figurine, jealous because it was resting, smiling, being still before God. I gathered my things and left after what seemed like an hour but turned out to be not quite thirty minutes.

This was going to be a long Lent.

After a while, I learned to accept my distractions. In such a fast-paced world, they were a part of me that I could not hide from God. Once I grew less frustrated with the distractions, they began to disappear. My thirty minutes of prayer became forty-five minutes and then an hour. I started saying the word *hope* less often and feeling at peace more often.

Some days were better than others. Sometimes I slept, and other times I read. But each morning held the joy of sitting before God. And those rare, special days when God gently whispered to me stay with me still.

STAY AWAKE CENTERING PRAYER

Soul-Trained

One Saturday morning, I needed to get away from my house. Before I knew it, I had put on my walking shoes, grabbed my sack of books, and made my pilgrimage to the church. My spirit craved centering. Only a month before, my need to escape would have taken me to a bookstore or a coffee shop. My morning practice, however, had trained my spirit to seek holy ground. The place where I once sat restless was now a place where I could rest in God's presence for most of the day.

Dig Deeper

We're constantly told that doing more and moving faster can make us better people, but being still for a time every day does make our souls better.

1. Find a restful spot. Leave your watch and cell phone behind.
2. Choose a simple word to help you focus when your mind wanders: *peace* or *God* or even a word that seems unrelated, such as *zap* or *swish*. Don't meditate on the word; simply let it remind you to be still.
3. Go easy on yourself. Focusing on God takes practice, just like anything else you want to learn to do. You may practice for weeks before centering feels remotely comfortable. You may never hear God's voice the way you want to hear it. The beauty of Centering Prayer lies in setting aside time each day to focus only on God.

STAY AWAKE CENTERING PRAYER

SHHHH

**For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.**

Psalm 62:5 (NRSV)

TURN OFF THE NOISE 11

Olaiya Muiwa Benralph [Abuja, Nigeria]

My transistor radio hummed all the time. All I could hear were incoherent voices. I thought the radio was useless until a technician examined it.

“You’ve set it to run on multiple frequencies at once,” he said. “To hear a broadcast, you must select only one station at a time. Once you jam frequencies, all you’ll hear is a humming noise.”

God speaks to us in many ways—through scripture, prayer, nature, other people. But we cannot hear God’s voice if we are also giving our attention to the voices of anxiety, worry, and fear. To hear God clearly, we must focus our thoughts and find a stillness within. Over time, this practice will help us calm our spirits and give our full attention to God. <

TRY CENTERING PRAYER: Find a quiet spot, unplug, and center your thoughts on God. To help you focus, choose a simple word, such as *calm* or *peace*. When your mind wanders, let this word remind you to be still and to refocus your attention on God.

Go easy on yourself. Focusing on God takes practice. You might practice for weeks before centering feels at all comfortable. You may never hear God’s voice the way you want to hear it. The beauty of centering prayer lies in setting aside time each day to focus only on God.



STAY AWAKE CENTERING PRAYER

LISTENING

WEEKEND!

I decided to take the time I usually set aside for talking to God and to spend it sitting silently and listening.

TOM ARTHUR

4 Listening in Prayer

TALKING

I hate listening. I'd rather talk. In conversations, when I'm supposed to be listening, I prepare what I'm going to say when you're done talking.

My prayer life is similar. For many years, I've taken time each morning to talk to God. I tell God what's on my mind. I call God's attention to my prayer list. I say prayers for myself, other people, and the world. Sometimes my prayers take on the flavor of a committee meeting: "OK, God, let's begin with item number one: my friends . . . Next, let's move on to item number two: all the poor in my community . . . Now on to item number three . . ." You get the idea.

38 NOV>DEC 2010

STAY AWAKE CENTERING PRAYER

LISTENING

WEEKEND!

What if I treated my friends as I treat God? What would happen if I spent all our time together naming people I wanted them to help and situations I wanted them to fix? What if our time was entirely filled with my talking? Soon I might not have any friends.

LISTENING

A journalist once asked Mother Teresa what she said to God when she prayed.

“I don’t say anything,” she replied. “I just listen.”

“And when you listen,” said the interviewer, “what does God say?”

“He doesn’t say anything,” she replied. “He just listens.” Before the bewildered journalist could say anything more, she added, “And if you can’t understand that, I can’t explain it to you.”

TRYING SILENCE

I grew up in a church where prayer was always active. For me to sit still and silent and to keep my mind from wandering for any length of time would be quite a challenge. Yet I was determined to give it a try. I decided to take the time I usually set aside for talking to God and to spend it sitting silently and listening.

I’ve been practicing silent listening prayer for about four months now. I can’t say that I’ve heard God say much, but I’m encouraged to know that Mother Teresa didn’t hear God say much either. Maybe God is giving to me exactly what God wants from me: a listening ear.

While I haven’t heard God talk while I’m listening, I have learned several lessons. First, sitting silently and listening in prayer isn’t as hard as I imagined. Second, I don’t have to do this perfectly. It’s OK if my mind wanders. Third, the entire world doesn’t rest on the shoulders of my prayer life. God is ultimately in charge.

I don’t think that my prayers will always be just listening. Maybe in the future, it will include both listening and talking; but right now I’m learning how to listen in prayer—and God is listening right back. <

Tom Arthur is the pastor at Sycamore Creek Church in Lansing, Michigan.

5 NEXT DAY STRETCH

Read 1 Kings 19:11–13. When did Elijah hear God’s voice? Make time this week to pray by listening for God in the “sheer silence.” Begin with a couple minutes of silence and work your way up to five or ten minutes. Don’t get stressed if your mind wanders. This is an experiment. If you need something to do while listening, focus on your breathing. This might help calm your mind and open your ears.

NOV>DEC 2010 **39**