



Prison  
Contemplative  
Fellowship

## Recognizing the Experiences of Our True Self

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### The Beginning Stages

Those who have come to Centering Prayer classes for some time are familiar with the notion of Divine Therapy. This describes our own unique spiritual journey once we begin a Centering Prayer practice. When we seriously pursue intimacy with God new vistas of self-realization come with the simple practice of holding still, going into silence, and letting go of thoughts.

It is 'therapy' because troubling thoughts, feelings, and experiences appear to arise more easily when we have a developed practice. It is as if we are with a therapist who knows us as much as we can allow anyone to know us, or as much as we can know ourselves. For real therapy to work with the deep stuff we need a vulnerability with ourselves and a trust in the therapist. Why would I want to talk about the painful stuff with anyone who would not understand me, or worse judge me for my painful and shaming experience? I can do that myself!

This therapy is called 'Divine' because our intention at the outset of our prayer period is set for silent communication with the God of our understanding even though we would be hard-pressed to describe the Divine more precisely.

As we walk this unique type of spiritual journey, we become familiar with our 'false self,' the sum of all the roles we have played, all the self-images we have tried on, all the ways we have tried to please others, and ourselves. From this new perspective of Divine Therapy, we can more easily see that our responses to the mandates of our false self have not been terribly successful. Usually, it becomes clear that this false self has screwed us up with its demand that we pursue the bogus notions of personal security, approval, and control.

### The Recognition of Our Shadow

As we dig deeper into our own motives and the intricacies of our spiritual journey, we discover that we carry around a 'shadow' personality. It is part of us, but not a part of us we would like anyone to see. It is there anyway. We start seeing clearly that we are not as kind, generous, or compassionate as we thought we were. As a matter of fact, we

recognize we have a ton of undisclosed jealousies, unbridled ambitions, and general motives that embarrass us.

This shadow self is different from the false self. The false self is the ‘program for happiness’ that we learn from our earliest years. It is part of our culture, part of the general education that teaches us, for example, ‘how to be a man or woman.’ Our shadow self is a part of us that is much more subtle, less obvious, and more repugnant to ourselves. This part of us stays in hiding most of the time.

Now the spiritual journey becomes harder. We cannot escape that our shadow is with us, not simply most of the time, but all the time! When we are not aware of it, it is usually because we are not paying attention. Our task now is to somehow integrate our shadow into our ongoing journey to personal transformation. Here is where frustration and discouragement can arise to stop us in our tracks and perhaps acknowledge that this ‘spiritual journey’ of divine therapy is more than we can handle. All we need at this point is difficulty finding the time to do centering prayer, or difficulty in the prayer time itself (‘... why can’t I pray today?’) Now we begin to believe that we are not making any progress on this journey. Our centering prayer practice begins to slide.

It is a dark time because we feel the ‘slide’ and yet we seem incapable of changing it. It is as if it is beyond our willpower. At this point, all that is left for us is to hold on. When we are in this state, we cannot really fight it. Our job is to be patient with ourselves and trust in the promises of intimacy with God.

### The Emergence of the True Self

Eventually, ever so subtly and gradually, our worldview starts to change. We realize deep in our gut that even though we are incapable of changing what seems to be our deepest self, to a great degree it does not make any difference. We are like the Prodigal Son who realizes that even though he has made one mistake after another, he is still better off in his father’s house. This realization is the threshold of appreciating our True Self. Our pursuit of intimacy with God is coming into view.

Unlike the ‘false self’ with its feigned certainty and stubbornness, the true self is barely recognizable. Its features are gentleness and humility. It can acknowledge the shadow part of ourselves, with some resignation and surrender, while opening to a new reality – beyond the false self and our shadow self. This True Self integrates both while experiencing the unconditional love of the Divine. Somehow from this point of view, it does not matter what falsities we live by, what deeply embarrassing shadows we carry with us, or, for that matter what degree of toxic shame inflicts us. In this True Self we know we are loved, as one wise person said, ‘not because we are good but because God is good’ and will always be there for us.

This subtle, gentle self-acceptance, the result of our desire for intimacy with God, allows us to affirm that there is a part of us that is beyond our ego, beyond our shadow with all its critical judgments and put-downs. This part is uniquely ours and comes to us because the capacity to realize our True Self is deeply implanted in our soul. It is God’s great gift.

It is who we are and who we are meant to be: A true child of God, loved unconditionally and intimately.