

The Experience of Spiritual Transcendence through Centering Prayer

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Abstract

This study examines how Spiritual Transcendence (ST) is experienced through the Christian contemplative practice of Centering Prayer. Ralph Piedmont's quantitative measure Assessment of Spirituality and Religious Sentiment Scale (ASPIRES) was adapted for qualitative analysis, arguing that the dynamic and nuanced experience of ST is not adequately recognized if viewed as a fixed personality trait as Piedmont proposes. ST can be defined as feelings of deep interconnection and the recognition of one's existence within a greater context. Data collected based on semi-structured interviews with three Centering Prayer practitioners support our critical hypothesis, yielding 15 rich themes exhibiting ST as a dynamic and on-going process of transformation informed by the practice of Centering Prayer. Primary themes being Active Process, Decentering, Embodiment and Different Way of Social Being, all of which positively contribute to the adjustment of the practitioner's understanding of themselves, of humanity, and of reality as spiritually transcendent.

Introduction

Over the centuries, much of the Western Protestant Church has placed a heavy emphasis on Cataphatic practice, which “engages our reason, memory, imagination, feelings and will.” (Bourgeault, 2004, p. 31). Reliance on these faculties are seen embedded within a typical Sunday service as Christians gather to listen to sermons, study passages of scripture, singing of worship and participate in the Lord’s table (Bourgeault, 2004). While this is the predominate framework for Protestant, as well as majority of mainstream Christian practice, such expressions of worship and spirituality covers but one facet of many available. The following study examines one practice out of a host of modalities which offer an entirely different level of depth to the believer, their communion with God, and others.

Such practices are considered to be Apophatic meaning, meditative and contemplative in nature. Apophatic practices focus on stillness and internal silence, which “bypasses our capacities for reason, imagination, visualization, emotion, and memory...” which “...may feel like emptiness or nothingness.”(Bourgeault, 2004, p. 32). Or as Utterback (2013) describes it is to “Rather than think about God or who God is or God's attributes, these practices let go of images of God entirely, which is often called the *via negativa*.” (p. 54). Cultivation of internal stillness and silence are often associated with meditation and contemplative practice of Eastern religious traditions, often being met with skeptical apprehension within the Christian community.

Christian Meditation

However Christianity does in fact have a rich heritage of apophatic contemplative and meditative practice. Contemplative practice has existed since the early Judeo desert Fathers and Mothers in the third and fourth centuries which was marked by its emphasis on “stillness or silence in prayer” (Ferguson, 2010, p. 62). However, the contemplative aspects of desert

spirituality dissipated from mainstream practice over the centuries, becoming widely unknown to modern-day Christians. One form of contemplative practice is that of Centering Prayer which models similar values as desert spirituality in practice. Centering Prayer was developed in the 1970s by a group of Trappist monks, namely, Thomas Keating, in efforts to reintroduce rich meditative practice back into mainstream awareness, as Christian meditation had “faded into a rarefied practice appropriate for cloistered monks well advance on the spiritual journey but not for laity.” (Ferguson, 2010, p. 63).

The practice of Centering Prayer “resides within a complex and complicated context of theological and mystical reflection.” (Fox et al., 2015, p. 805). The fundamental belief of the practice is that our utmost core being is irrevocably God’s imprinted love. Thomas Merton describes this as:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship.” (Fox et al., 2015, p. 805)

The objective of Centering Prayer is to be an accessible method for cultivating internal stillness and silence, leading one to become aware of that love and presence within. However, as Keating (2004) states this “spiritual level is not immediately evident to ordinary consciousness; we have to do something to develop our awareness to it. It is the level of our being that makes us more human. The values that we find there are more delightful than the values that float along the surface of the psyche.” (p. 20), Centering Prayer becomes the vehicle which believers may use to sink below this conscious level. Keating's organization *The Contemplative Outreach* aims

to build the contemplative community through teaching and practice. Four guidelines are offered in the practice of Centering Prayer:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When engaged with your thoughts,* return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

This practice is recommended daily as Keating (2006) says "we need to refresh ourselves at this deep level every day. Just as we need exercise, food, rest and sleep, so also we need moments of interior silence because they bring the deepest kind of refreshment." (p. 20).

Centering Prayer is but one of many meditative practices which recently have received immense attention from the academic community. Religious meditative practices and Mindfulness, which is a secular adaptation of Zen-Buddhist meditation, have gone from "less than a dozen articles a year prior to 1998 to almost 500 per year by 2012." (Waelde & Thompson, 2016, p. 119). Perhaps one reason for exponential growth in investigation has been due because of the strong physical and psychological benefits experienced by meditative practitioners.

Physical benefits

Meditation and mindfulness-based interventions (MMBI) fall under the umbrella of contemporary alternative medicine (CAM) which has become increasingly utilized within the medical community (Wachholtz & Austin, 2013). One major area MMBI practices have been beneficial is within conditions that are psychosomatic in nature. Psychosomatic conditions which have been documented to be receptive to MMBI are cardiovascular disorders such as hypertension and hypercholesterolemia (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). As well, people with various chronic pain syndromes have found meditative practices helpful in alleviating symptoms and

pain management (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Waelde & Thompson (2016) suggest that better pain management is a result of another effect of meditative practice which is increased body awareness, inferring that “body awareness has been associated with functional changes in interoceptive and homeostatic processes, including an enhanced prefrontal cognitive reappraisal of pain unpleasantness...” (p. 137). As well, lasting changes in the brain have been identified with long term prayer practitioners, comparing a group of Christian Nuns and Tibetan Monks (Wachholtz & Austin, 2013). It was found that “they showed elevated activation in the prefrontal cortex, inferior parietal lobes, and inferior frontal lobes. This is in contrast to Tibetan Buddhist meditators using mind-clearing meditation, who showed increased blood flow to the right thalamus, bilateral prefrontal cortex, inferior frontal lobes, and right medial temporal lobe” (Wachholtz & Austin, 2013, p. 318) While MMBI, meditation and contemplative practices are intangible activities of the mind there is a direct impact to the well-being of the body.

Psychological Benefits

Within clinical therapeutic practice there has also been a growing interest in utilizing meditative and contemplative interventions. As demonstrated “ in a survey of more than 2000 North American practicing psychotherapists, mindfulness was the third most frequently endorsed theoretical orientation, utilized by 41%.” (Waelde & Thompson, 2016, p. 120). Significant areas of improvement have been depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), substance abuse, personality disorders, and antisocial behaviour (Wachholtz and Austin, 2013). Personality changes have also been noted as many practitioners develop greater emotional regulation or equanimity meaning the individuals are less emotionally reflexive in their surroundings, exhibiting increased compassion and other prosocial behaviours (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). This has been theorized to be a result of the

meditative practice's ability to readjust their perception, reflexivity, and reflection of their own reality (Blanton, 2011). Blanton (2011) continues to support psychological reorientation as "clients learn to be in the moment, they learn to let go of evaluations and conceptualizations. By disentangling themselves from the chatter of the mind, clients learn that thoughts are passing events of the mind." (p. 141).

Reaching a Deeper Self

While meditative practice meets the practitioner within the complex intersection of body and mind, there exists yet a third dimension experienced, that is the spiritual. The spiritual nature of meditation is arguably one of the reasons for its globally beneficial effects (Wachholtz & Austin, 2013). Within the body-mind intersection there is a deeply subtle yet transformative process, quietly reprogramming the perspective within the individual and consequentially their world view, drawing them into a transcendent consciousness.

Ego Erosion

In one regard, Centering Prayer is considered to be the simultaneous transcendence and healing of the ego (Bourgeault, 2004). As the prayer practitioner engages in Centering Prayer, the beliefs of the ego which have been shaped and damaged over the course of one's life become laid open before God as they reorient themselves at God's imprinted center of love within (Bourgeault, 2004). When we operate purely from the demands and wants of the ego it "leads us to an implosion, a self-preoccupation that cannot enter into communion with the other or the moment." (Rohr, 2006 p. 16). However, as we displace the focus as practiced through Centering Prayer, Rohr (2006) describes the distancing of oneself from these needs as creating a "second gaze" of vision (p. 16). Instead of being fixated with our own image, concerns and desires, by focusing on the God given center of love within us, we can see beyond our own needs and into the needs of

others. Rohr (2006) further describes the second gaze as one that “sees fully and truthfully. It sees itself, the other and even God with God’s own eyes, which are always eyes of compassion.” (p.20).

Transcendence

Maslow (1994) examines similar experiences but from within the context of peak experiences or transcendent experiences and that these experiences are available in all walks of belief. Maslow (1994) describes the phenomena of similar overlap as “all mystical or peak experiences are the same in their essence and have always been the same, all religions in their essence have always been the same.” (p. 20). Maslow (1994) argues that peak experiences are available to all people, however, those who ever rejects them is” the person who is afraid of them, who suppresses them, who denies them, who turns away from them, or who forgets them” (p. 22). He deems formal religion one culprit for subduing peak experiences, thus creating non-peakers. The ineffable nature of peak experiences seems incompatible within the religious framework. Maslow criticizes belief systems by saying it “has been the curse of every large religion, in concretizations that these finally become hostile to the original mystical experiences, to mystics, and to prophets in general...” (p. 24). According to Maslow, religion ironically numbs the individual to their experience of spirituality or even God. In order for religion to penetrate the entirety of the individual and their existence, they must first fully embrace their beliefs, their whole understanding and engagement (Maslow, 1994), but for many, this has yet to happen and they coast on a superficial level of faith and belief. This is complementary to Utterback (2013), who suggests one concern for Christian’s practicing contemplative practice is that they could wander too deep into mysticism and lose grounding within doctrinal beliefs. However, Utterback

(2013) follows this with the suggestion that instead of misleading, Christians would experience a deepening richness and transcendent experiences as “such practices today could well have the opposite effect, giving people a firmer basis to pursue spiritual lives in ways they may not get in churches, as some might have done in the past.” (p. 60).

Spiritual Transcendence

The purpose of this study is to examine the integration of spirituality within a transcendent practice. By looking at the vibrancy of enriched spirituality through the practice of Centering Prayer, we ask, how is spiritual transcendence experienced in the lives of Centering Prayer practitioners? To examine this construct, we investigated the lived experiences of three centering prayer practitioners and how Spiritual Transcendence is made manifest throughout their inner lives, communion with others, and understanding of God.

Investigating Spiritual Transcendence

The Assessment of Spirituality and Religious Sentiment Scale (ASPIRES)

Through the development of the Assessment of Spirituality and Religious Sentiment Scale, Ralph Piedmont claims to accurately quantifiably measure experiences that are ineffable and sacred in nature (Piedmont, 2014). The goal of ASPIRES is to be an “empirically sound measure that would capture the fundamental aspects of spirituality; those numinous qualities (e.g, awe, wonder, an appreciation of, and search for, the sacred) that underlie and are common to all religious faiths.” (Piedmont, 2014, p. 105). Piedmont’s scale examines two main portions of a spiritual experience, Spiritual Transcendence (ST) and Religious Sentiment (RS) both are utilized within the ASPIRES instrument. For the purpose of our study, we focused on the usage of the ST portion.

According to Piedmont's definition of Spiritual Transcendence (ST) there are three components: connectedness: "feelings of belonging and responsibility to a larger human reality that cuts across generations and groups", universality: "the belief in a larger meaning and purpose to life" and prayer fulfillment: "the ability to create a personal space that enables one to feel a positive connection to some larger reality." (Piedmont, 2014, p. 105). These three sub-facets combine together to form ST as Piedmont defines "a universal human capacity to stand outside of one's own immediate existence and the view from a broader, more integrated whole" (Piedmont, 2014 p. 106).

However, Piedmont examines ST from the perspective of a fixed motivational construct held within one's personality which impacts personal meaning-making. We suggest it is less of a construct but is instead transient, unfolding over the course of the practitioner's life but held together by the on-going practice itself. The nature of transcendent experiences are subtle, despite Maslow's extravagant descriptions of transcendent experiences, we anticipate the lived experience of prayer practitioners as more subtle and embodied within their day to day interactions and internal experiences. Therefore, we suggest that a qualitative alternative would be a more appropriate means to examine the experiences of ST.

The rationale behind a qualitative alternative can be drawn by the comparison between Fox et al., (2015) and Fox et al.,(2016). Fox et al., (2016) documents a pilot study which utilized ASPIRES in a seven-month experiment measuring the effects of Centering Prayer in faith development. Prayer practitioners filled out both segments of ASPIRES and results of the study were ultimately insignificant and inconclusive to their experience. However, researchers were able to determine that ST surprisingly decreased while Religious Crisis (RC) increased (Fox et al., 2016). This concluded that this limitation was potentially the result of participants entering

into the phenomena of the *Dark Night of the Soul* leading to feelings of spiritual destitute and futility in prayer practice. As well, the small sample size (n=9) was suggested to contribute to the overall weakened power of the study (Fox et al., 2016).

The pilot studies poor outcomes are juxtaposed with the rich content gathered in Fox et al., (2015) by a phenomenological approach to examining the experience of Centering Prayer in the lives of 20 prayer practitioners. Five themes were identified being: *The Divine* “ the manifestation of God in all complexity”, *The Mystical* “ the unity of spiritual experience”, *Spiritual Development* the “ development of crises, stages or aspects of one’s spirituality over time” , *Action-Contemplation* “ how centering prayer is made manifest in tangible ways” and *Contemplative Life* “ the greater context of centering prayer within the lives of those individuals who are devoted to prayer”. (Fox et al., 2015, p. 810-812)

When these five themes are compared to the three sub-facets of ST, their qualities can be seen interwoven throughout the experiences of the participants. Within *The Divine*, the sub-facets are highlighted as participants experienced a transcendent unity and “limitless potential to experience God in everything” (Fox et al., 2015, p. 809) through their prayer practice. Evidence within *The Mystical* can be seen through what was said to be a “powerful sense of continuity between themselves, God, and their world.” (p. 814). *Spiritual Development* illustrated aspects of *Dark Night of the Soul* describing it’s a positive contribution to the practitioner's relationship with God as “ a mature marital relationship based upon unwavering commitment” despite the lack of “ immediate gratification” they had once received through the practice (Fox et al., 2015, p. 817). This highlights ST as transient and developing over time, and when given the space and context to expand, ST can have greater clarity. This was perhaps one of the flaws of the pilot study, being a shorter time period, as well as the fixed answer of

ASPIRES. *Contemplative Action* aligns most closely to connectedness and universality as participants develop a greater sense of self-compassion and compassion for others, highlighting a “perceptual shift” in their orientation. Lastly, the *Contemplative Life* highlights the necessity for a contemplative community and transcendent experiences associated with contemplative practice and how they inform the practitioner in positive ways. In the light of Piedmonts definition of ST, as well as the three sub-facets, the experiences of the Fox et al., (2015) study are immensely valuable in understanding the expression of the participant’s transformative process. By illuminating the subtlety and overlap, a qualitative approach is therefore more appropriate to yield the insight necessary to answer adequately answer our research question.

Methodology

To transpose the quantitative measure of ASPIRES into our suggested qualitative alternative, we examined specifically the ST portion of the scale. The ST scale is comprised of 23 five-point Likert scale, interlaced with questions surrounding connectedness, universality and prayer fulfillment questions. When examined closely six themes were interpreted to be present within the question set, those being: interpersonal connection, connection to God, individual practice, motivation, identity and belief in a transcendent reality. In reflection of these six themes and the existing literature surrounding the experience of Centering Prayer, meditative experiences and the transcendence ten open-ended questions were developed to be asked within a semi-structured format (available in Appendix item 1). As well, an eleventh question was asked leaving the discussion open to further comments participants may have had to their experience, partly out of courteous respect but also to accommodate any limitations within our own question set.

Three prayer practitioners were obtained to be interviewed for this study. Participants varied in the number of years spent practicing Centering Prayer, ranging from 10, 5 and 3 years. Variation also extended into age and profession of each participant. Interview varied in length ranging 40 minutes, one hour, and an hour and a half. Each participant provided rich, articulate insight into their experience. Their eagerness to discuss Centering Prayer was evident, as well, the value of personal reflection of their experiences was also noted throughout their participation. Field notes were taken pre and post-interview, as well an interview guide was utilized to redirect the conversation back to the research question when necessary.

After completing the interviews voice recordings were transcribed verbatim utilizing Express Scribe Transcription Software. After completing transcription, rigor was established by mild inter-rater examination of the data and a 15 code hierarchy was established.

Results

After completing the interviews voice recordings were transcribed verbatim utilizing Express Scribe Transcription Software. After completing transcription, rigor was established by mild inter-rater examination of the data and a 15 code hierarchy was established, as represented in figure 1.

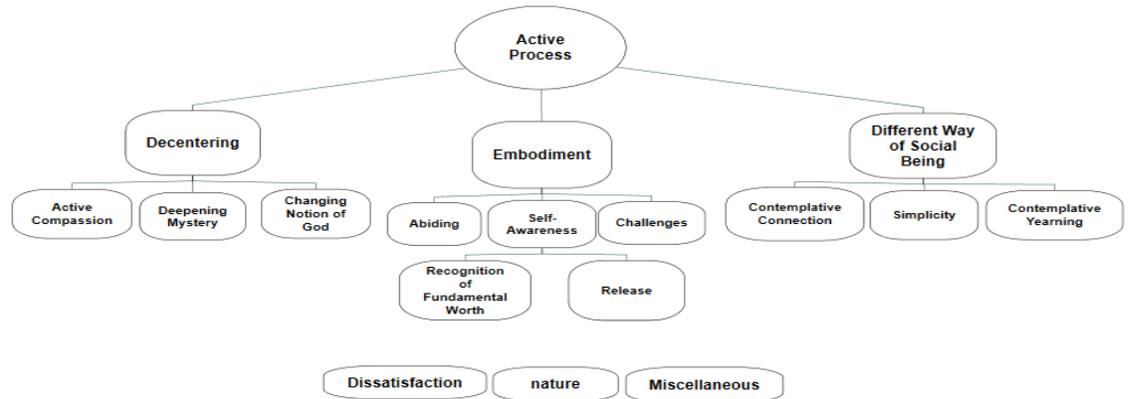


Figure.1. Code hierarchy generated by NVivo 12 software

The overarching theme of Active Process was established over the other 14 themes. Active Process was made evident by participants stressing the contingency for their experiences on the active upkeep of their prayer practice. By having Active Process as the key component through which all other themes branch off from, the sub-facet of Prayer Fulfillment becomes embedded within each and every subsequent theme. Partly due to the nature of our research question in asking how specifically the practice of Centering Prayer impacted their life, the very act of a having an ongoing spiritual practice fulfills the role of Prayer Fulfillment. However there does still remain the actual experience as being gradual and demanding consistency. Char-Chellman & Kroth (2017) support the idea of spiritual experience being an active process since it is experienced as “becoming” as “the process of “becoming” is the actual goal. Perfection is unattainable by anyone; progress is attainable by everyone.” (p.25) Similarly,

Wachholtz & Austin (2013) comment how the benefits of MMBI were only experienced as long as participants had on-going practice.

One participant describes the nature of on-going process of becoming in the context of their faith experience.

“there’s a grounding in knowing that there’s something consistent you’re doing spiritual, that you hope and you believe builds you up and allows you to be more sensitive to the movement of the spirit and allows you to be more compassionate and allows you to be, allows the process of sanctification to take place in you. It doesn’t it’s not the process, but it’s hopefully steps in, in that direction allowing that to happen.”

As they describe Centering Prayer as a piece that helps enact the greater process of sanctification, this reflects back on the boundless room for growth and transformation available within our lifetime, as one can never fully master their ego or their soul’s nature. Active Process describes the on-going transformative process one engages in when they practice Centering Prayer. Comments towards this process were mentioned throughout the various themes, most strongly in self-awareness but not exclusively.

Decentering

The first major theme branch is that of Decentering. This theme describes the participant’s reorientation of beliefs about God and personal investment in their own understanding of self, and the immediacy of experience. A certain objective distance is developed throughout this theme, considered to be a common effect of meditation. Waelde & Thompson (2016) describe the process of decentering as to “create a distance between a maladaptive reified sense of self and the sensory reality of the present moment, creating a more adaptive sense of self that is less attached to any single perspective” (p.137). Decentering set the stage for themes which aligned with universality and connectedness, according to Piedmont

(2014) themes experienced within this category fall under what is considered a long event horizon of immediacy, as in address a broader scope of perspective.

Changing Notion of God

This subordinate theme highlighted a growing sense of incongruence with the practitioner's experiences, their past beliefs, and experiences within Christianity. Most often it resulted in a sense of faith maturation. This theme related most closely to the sub-facet of universality as participants reshaped their understanding, opening to themselves to new possibilities as to who God is to them. One participant described how Centering Prayer led them on a very personal journey of having to redefine who God was to them.

"I realized that it was a very, and it was a difficult time for me, because I realized I didn't even, I didn't like God (sharp laugh), I didn't like the image, I didn't like God. According to what I understood of him at the time. There was a lot of fear and there was a lot of resentment about things that have happened to me over my life and so um... That was a weird thing but there is another saying that Keating has and it's like Centering Prayer is about letting God introduce himself to you as he or she is and not as you think they are. So I said okay well, I'm gonna whatever, I'm just gonna sit with this guy even though I don't like you. I'll just open myself to think that maybe who I think you are is not really who you are."

For this participant, it ultimately led to a deepening of their understanding and relationship with God.

"I think my view has really shifted to understand that God loves us in every single circumstance and the words and the... there's a trust level, I would say I have a way deeper trust now than I did ten years ago."

For another participant, Changing Notion of God was illustrated through their rejection of past depictions of God previously experienced and how they were no longer relevant in the light of their experience and understanding through Centering Prayer

"I think it's VERY hard to hold on to the theology and beliefs that go along with the view of big daddy in the sky, and to continually practice centering prayer."

Deepening Mystery

Universality was most evident throughout this theme. Deepening Mystery is used to identify ways which the participants had increasing tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty in their understanding. Maslow (1994) suggests the notion of dichotomy-transcendence is a naturally occurring part of spiritual experiences which is the “acceptance and resolution” of two polarities which when brought together become “collaborating or mutually enhancing partners.” (p.92). This is supported as paradoxical statements were often made, showing ease in existing in the in-between as understanding moved from a less of a binary and into that of expanding the complexity of God and the universe. It was marked by wonder and even appreciation for that mystery.

“If God is all inclusive and He is all love then even things that will look like obstacles to us you know their just part of love they’re just different. It’s how we look at it really, it’s just really changed my view, I just don’t take things as personally, it’s not quite all about me you know, we live in a...in a far more random universe than that”

“There is something that is very mundane about centering prayer, it’s just sitting there being quiet yet there’s something so deeply profound and sacred about it, and it’s all those at once.”

“...Somehow 14 billion years ago something happened , and we’re not sure what, and that the natural process has led to consciousness in the universe and lead to me and you sitting down using some crazy technology, having a deep conversation about the ways which we abide in that mystery and are absolutely and completely apart of that mystery. That in fact there is nothing in the human condition that is profane because it is all mystery it all belongs. That doesn’t mean that to allow suffering to continue and we can abate suffering for ourselves or for others but the fact is that there’s nothing profane in this, it is all God.”

Active Compassion

This theme was most closely related to Connectedness. Active Compassion speaks to the prayer practitioner’s sense of necessity and yearning to better connect to those around them.

Active Compassion has a similar internal detachment created between the participant’s initial

emotional reactions or assumptions and how they actually perceive another person, as Waelde & Thompson (2016) describes. One participant describes

“It’s hard to remain sad, angry, distant, or overly attached, it’s hard to engage in a lot of unhealthy connections to others, if my practice is fairly intact. There will be times when the quiet time in the day is clearly responsible for my being more present, a better listener, more compassionate, more attentive, and more empathetic.”

However, beyond distance is a greater curiosity and tolerance towards conflictual individuals or relationships within their life.

“How do I be helpful and how do I bring a little bit of tenderness to why is it curiosity, so why is it that your behaviours to your colleagues seem to be racist? And what is it about you and your upbringing and your worldview? That I can now sit there more than I use to be able to sit there, and be curious, because I don’t just want to bonk him in the nose.”

Increased curiosity reflects a greater sense of clarity, or clarity of vision experienced through Centering Prayer, similarly to Rohr (2006)’s second gaze as the result of an internal distance, the eroded ego, allowing one to see beyond a maladaptive lenses created throughout their life.

“When this works, and it doesn’t always, by any means. When this works you can see people as more than their status markers, and their clothing and their appearance and their presentation... When this works you get to a point that you start building up, and again I don’t – tiny steps- that sense of compassion that comes from seeing clearly. And not seeing the facades and the illusions that we throw up and people throw up around themselves.”

One participant commented on how by extension, the internal distance created by Centering Prayer also felt as a shield towards to “barrage” of societal pressures they experienced, and how in turn they had a greater clarity of thought and sense of choice they were able to make.

“I think most of culture, myself included, reacts to what’s in front of them and lives in a mess of distractions and alarms going off and demands being thrown at them from all around you and the omnipresence of advertising the , the effects of social media, all these things. Those are

modern examples but this goes back as long as there's been human culture, the culture has demanded things of people around it. So, to be able to have defenses against the barrage and to get to a point that in a situation you can honestly ask what, what is the act of love in the situation what is the act of compassion in the situation as opposed to all of this chaos that reins around that tells you what you need to do."

The sense of clarity the participants describe, aligns with many of Maslow (1994)'s characteristics of Being. As participants clear their vision, the intrinsic values or reality resulting in a reprioritized sense of obligation to the world at large.

"I think that as we get ourselves out of our own way and broaden our vision to the rest of the world then engage in that depth dimension that is a deepening into God we can't but be filled up with the heart of Christ. With the love of God, with that deep yearning to commune with those who are experiencing great joy and great suffering. Those are the big transformative moments in our lives."

While Active Compassion was found to shape a grand outlook in life, there remains a sense of immediacy and presence within the moment and day to day functioning of their life, as it continues to inform their daily interactions.

Different Way of Social Being

This theme describes the softening of societal ideals, counter-cultural behaviour and a change in the perceptions the practitioner has of themselves and their social obligations. Fredrickson et al.,(2008) attributes social changes to the increase of positive emotion experienced throughout a prayer practitioners life with the decrease of stress and anxiety. While this may be true, it became evident that although Centering Prayer is solidary in practice it brings about a new way of social functioning in the type of community it invites and the role practitioners find themselves inhabiting.

Simplicity

This theme related most closely to universality as participants revalued their priorities, and found rejuvenation through the low demand practice, shaping their experience and motives throughout the broader context of their life. One participant describes their sense of freedom found through their contemplative lifestyle, as described below.

“... it’s quite freeing to allow yourself to allow all those layers to come off and so a lot of what I did was to impress other people and to look good and society and I’m like well that’s not a very useful thing for humanity, so now it’s more about creating that kind of a space for myself and doing that allows people around me to hopefully call them to something deeper and allows them that space the that we all need..”

For one participant simplicity by contemplative practice impacted their outlook towards their life trajectory and motivation, as a contemplative life meant acknowledging sacrifice.

“I’m very committed to living a contemplative life and so if you’re doing that means that you’re not going to be taking on jobs where you work sixty hours a week or you know having a lifestyle where you have three cars and four houses or whatever... (laughter) it means a simpler life....that’s a very different role then I guess what I thought my life would be about.”

For another participant, simplicity was experienced through the low demand nature of the practice. Meditation was a refreshing change of pace in their worship and life, allowing them to simply be present to themselves and God with no pressure of the outcome as described below.

“I just kinda do it, it feels right, doesn’t have to go anywhere, it just is. It makes my day go easier. (Laughter)”

“... at some level you know, the job is simply to show up, right? In the beginning one of my teachers would say, he would quote Thomas Merton and say “with God a little sincerity goes a long way” just gotta show up.”

For another participant, simplicity was most strongly experienced through the non-discursive, apophatic nature of Centering Prayer. Their silent communing with God became a powerful means of connection and spiritual restoration.

“There is a peace and simplicity to it, it’s freed from any notion of having to explain it or theorize about it or fit it into categories or denominations or doctrinal statements or any of that. There’s a fundamental simplicity to it that is remarkable”

Contemplative Connection

This theme tied most closely to connection. All three of our participants had prayer communities which they regularly met with, yielding a deep sense of intimacy.

“What I really see is that practicing centering prayer with others, like – or knowing, like I’ve been a part of a small group or even just attending retreats. Or other just time for sitting in silence with other people- it bonds. I feel bonded to those people in a way that I have not bonded to many people in my life.”

The experience of prayer within community was admired by all three participants and had meaningfully contributed to their own individual practice. Participants felt “solidarity” with fellow prayer practitioners in their struggles and transformative process.

“there’s a different sense of it if even though your eyes are closed and you’re in silence, there’s something slightly different and sort of glorious about doing it in a community of people that share the practice...”

“there’s a piece of me that feels connected to a larger spiritual community. I know now the ways in which I’m having the type of experience that many many many others might be having, whether they are practitioners of centering prayer or something similar.”

For one participant, when asked about how they feel connected to God during the prayer period, they referred back to a sense of transcendent community which they experienced through the discipline.

“I would say it’s linked to that sense of really being connected to everyone else, like everyone in the world when you’re praying, I do find a real sense in that, so even though it’s a solitary practice I really feel like I’m with others when I’m praying. Yeah I can’t explain that yeah that to me is very powerful.”

Contemplative Yearning

Contemplative Yearning aligns most closely with connectedness, as participants felt a deep rootedness within their immediate faith communities, but also within a historical sense. The majority of this theme was initially coded as dissatisfaction as there were deep longings for a contemplative practice not readily found in the church or prior understanding of faith practice, and frustration towards exclusive reliance on discursive practices or worship practices that focus on emotional engagement, joy, praise and rejoicing, with little room for silence and abiding in sorrow or suffering. The chief complaint seemed to linger on the lack of depth which was experienced in their own faith, but readily offered through other traditions. However when meditation was explored, participants felt a sense of rich rootedness to their faith community in a greater historical context. This new dimension of communing with God also led to growing authenticity in their own faith. One participant describes the process of exploring their yearning.

“If there are parts of contemplation that are so good elsewhere, like you would look at the goodness, like I would look at the goodness that I’ve experienced in the practices through some of the Buddhist teachings, well if this is the real authentic faith, then where’s that goodness in our own faith? Oh there it is, there it is, right? It existed a long tradition in contemplative Christianity it’s just not the books that are on the book shelf and scriptures that are being preached, in most churches, especially not protestant churches in most faiths. So one, there’s meaning in centering prayer that there’s some homecoming. In the sense of thank you for reaffirming to me that the connection to the, that I have to that which is bigger than me has been well explored within my own faith tradition. Wow, that is reassuring, that’s wonderful.”

“I always had a hunger for finding out where that tradition was in Christianity so centering prayer for me at one level has been just a very meaningful connection to the rootedness of our own faith. It’s like a bit of homecoming, right? It’s like “I’ve been looking for this! I haven’t found it in my own house, and oh my goodness there it is! It’s in the back cupboard, what a minute it’s a whole room and there’s all these people there and some of them call themselves

catholic, or whatever right and some of them are just Christians who have found the contemplative dimension of Christianity be they, Methodist, or Anglican or where ever they are from in the tradition. So there's some-so part of the meaning for me is actually simply a connection to the authenticity of the practice of the Christian faith."

For another participant, Centering Prayer fulfilled a role that otherwise felt neglected within their life.

"I had always really valued prayer and relationship and you know time alone and you know reflection and it's hard to do that when you're in the middle of all these other responsibilities so I just think it really helped give me a framework for doing that, for really practicing interior silence that just you know, honestly, I would say it was a lifesaver to me because I had been looking for that type of practice and I had seen over the years that no matter what my day circumstances are I know you really try to stay regular with that and incorporate it into my daily life."

Embodiment

Embodiment describes the participant's spiritual awareness and experiences within a physical context, specifically the bodily experience. Although some participants already had a well-established understanding of their human nature viewing soul and body as an inseparable unified package, embodied experience also became a way of communing with God. Therefore moving away from dichotomy of body and soul allowing participants to experience God within and through their physicality and body awareness.

Abiding

As practice Centering Prayer is non discursive, prayer practitioners must simply be in the fullness of their physicality during the prayer period. Although this theme shares a great deal of traits as Different Way of Social Being the emphasis on their personal embodied experience and understanding warranted distinction. One participant describes the enriching effects of embracing their physicality through the prayer practice.

"It's in those moments when I'm quiet and most centered in the physicality of my body that I'm actually begins at times to almost be boundary-less. I'm not talking about the occasional experience where people describe a true unitive moment where there is absolutely no self and

they are one with. It. All. Just a quiet abiding, grounded, centeredness with the emotions settled and the brain settled and just the most basically in my own body paying attention to it. And in there is my easiest portal to a deeper connection to God.”

Another participant described how the sensation of God’s presence was something that was felt through bodily sensation as opposed to cognitive awareness or understanding.

“It’s just that deep centering. I actually feel it in my body. Which is a way I’ve heard other people explain it, like I’m not... I’m not- it’s even my heart space is more into my gut and that’s where I go where it’s deep quiet, but generally like a, a word, it’s generally like an unawareness”

Although these physically abiding experiences may not be considered to be an experience of cosmic unity, there is still a unified experience within themselves. As the prayer practitioners engage in Centering Prayer, they increase their own body awareness, allowing them to wholly approach God in the fullness of their physicality, spirit, and mind as the three are inseparably woven.

There’s a deep personal presence that doesn’t feel like another person and begins to not even feel like another, but is something that is greater, and so there’s a deepening in the active relationship with God and the embodied sense I suppose I would say.

Challenges

The theme of challenges doesn’t align closely to any of the three sub-facets. Rather, it represents much of balancing act between maintaining body/mind awareness, while facing repetitive struggles and frustrations. Above all, Challenges offers further insight into the active process of Centering Prayer, as described by one participant below.

“The experience of centering prayer, the experience of the mind and its thoughts, and how they get released. Whether or not certain things stay on loop up there (laughter) and whether or not they can be dismissed, the moments of silence in-between thoughts and what those feel like. What sort of sense of connection you get out of those, these things have certainly grown ups and downs, there’s no straight line in any of this, but over time”

While there is frustration experienced in the practice, there is also a sense of comfort and resolve in the forgiving nature of Centering Prayer, similar to the simplistic experience.

“If there is a particularly, strong and repetitive stress in your life, then getting to centering prayer and actually doing the practice and being effective at the practice can become very difficult. There’s a sense of frustration, desolation is a word that a lot of contemplatives like to use for feeling like you’re getting nowhere with it. Feeling like the practice doesn’t do anything, feeling like your brain is just full of thoughts and there’s no emptiness or release that you’re capable of doing which happens sometimes.”

One participant described the inner tensions they’ve noticed which the desire to subdue the ego, while simultaneously creating a framework of additional rules and boxes to check off thus rewarding the ego instead of releasing it. This further highlights the gradual aspects of eroding the power of the ego over the individual.

“I think is a real call, it’s a real yearning, so some yearning (laughter) and to meet that yearning I’m going to sit quietly and meet that yearning in the space where I can be open to the experience of God. But I want to do it in my own tradition because I’m a Christian and I want to do it with a group of people because I want to know that there are people around the world who are doing the same that I’m doing. And oh I’m told I should do it every day, am I really told I should do it every day? Maybe I’m just telling myself I should do it every day, oh maybe twice a day and maybe for longer- and so there’s little egotistic pieces that start showing up as we form the rules around centering prayer and do I think I’m less rule bound around centering prayer...”

Tensions experienced in Challenges highlights the on-going process of gradually eroding the power and desire the ego holds over the individual.

Self-awareness

Self-awareness is a necessary component in experiencing universality and connectedness. It is also perhaps one of the most directly related to attending to the present than any of the other themes. Walsh & Shapiro (2006) describe how “refinement of awareness may therefore be a central process mediating the therapeutic benefits both of meditations and of psychotherapies...”

therefore making self-awareness foundational to the transformative process (p.231). One participant described how through their increased self-awareness they had a better grasp on their own self-knowledge from Centering Prayer.

“Centering prayer has highlighted and begun the process of examination of how has the base of who I am, right, at the egoic level, in what ways am i very identified, or certain parts of my personality, you know. If I had an online dating profile and you had a bunch of adjectives if I had ten adjectives to describe myself, centering prayer makes it kind of an easier process but also a more difficult process.”

While another highlighted a more embodied sense of self-awareness, and how feeling and acknowledging their bodily response to stimuli became a useful tool to gain distance and re-centering.

“The primary reason to do it is more spiritual, but it has effect of being a regular daily, twice daily, and training on a particular set of abilities that your mind is able to do. And you want to have that training you can revert to in times of stress, or anxiety or sadness. That it’s there, it’s immediate, you don’t have to sort of, search for it and find it from some other place that you’re not use to, you do it 40 minutes a day, it’s so immediate that you have that option of saying, of noticing how your thinking, noticing how your feeling, noticing your reactions, noticing how your body reacts, your blood pressure and your temperature and all of that and being able to find some distance from it, if you need that distance.”

Self-awareness serves as a rudimentary step in the journey to developing and participating in ST as it requires careful cultivation of stillness and first attending to oneself before attending to others.

Recognition of Fundamental Worth

Recognition of Fundamental Worth is the first sub theme of Self-awareness. At some point in each interview, participants made comments or statements that revealed a forgiving nature towards themselves. They had increased self-compassion, and grace towards their shortcomings, which stemmed from the recognition of their irreducible value in the eyes of God

as seen similarly in Fox et al., (2015). As described by the participants below, this too was a part of the gradual, ongoing experience of ST and Centering Prayer

“I’ll just say up front the center that has driven me a lot in my life is the center for affection and esteem. So it allowed me to, first of all, recognize that I was doing all of that and so really shifting to say “Hm.. but I’m much more than that”, like my inner core is God’s love and generosity and not getting so worried about what other people think of me so it’s allowing me to live in that space a lot more.”

“I don’t want you to think I’ve been like this all the time, but I’m definitely getting there. I’m a lot easier on myself than I used to be, it’s a much nicer place to live.”

Another participant commented on how the very teachings and foundation of Centering Prayer is embedded within Christianity’s primary teaching: we wholly belong and are loved by God. From this teaching they found deep grounding within the practice of Centering Prayer as it relies on reminding the individual of their primary value and center of being.

“Your worth is from the fact that you are a child of God and has no reference to any other aspects of who you are and where you might happen to be and that is an immensely difficult teaching. Because we are always trapped in the sense that my worth is how well I do ...and whether or not my family feels I’ve lived up the obligations that they expect of me. So Dissolving those false worth’s, not that their necessarily bad, doing your job well is good, being a good friend and spouse and child and parent are, all these things are wonderful but they’re not , if they become the source of your self-worth then as soon as they’re in trouble your self-worth is in trouble. So, eroding the fact that that’s where you identify what makes you a worthwhile human being, and your worth as a human being is antecedent to all of those things.”

Another participant commented on how being grounded in the reality of their inherent value free them to better invested in others and function to a fuller capacity in the world.

“It makes a pretty interesting worldview as you deepen, as I deepen into centering prayer and go “actually I am loved, like unconditionally” and I’m beginning to have that embodied sensation in the darkness and quiet of being one with that, that loves me deeply and fully because I am no other than it. Then I’m okay, and I don’t have to be good so that I’m loved, so I don’t have to be a helper in order to be seen as good so that I am loved, I can just be a helper. (Laughter) And it’s, in now it’s much more about the other soul than it is about me and my own needs.”

In one way, Recognition of Fundamental Worth reflects the realization of the truest form of self as Blanton (2011) describes as the “transcendent-self” as they disengage from prior labels and systems of measuring their value (p.141)

Release

Release was aligned most closely with universality, as it influences the participant’s perspective of themselves, and the meaning of their experiences, and identity as they are pointed beyond the immediacy of their emotions and reactions.

“As a core thing that centering prayer is teaching you to do that your always noticing and releasing thoughts. And if nothing else, just, building the habit of being able to do that and sort of increasing that mental muscle. That is capable of noticing and releasing, is, extremely valuable.”

Another participant described the leveling of emotional reactions as an effect of Centering Prayer known as equanimity, as supported by Walsh & Shapiro (2006)

When it works, I think it gives you a kind of equanimity, which is a word that a lot of mystics and meditation teachers talk about, that your , your natural state, or whatever, the state that you can be most yourself and most connected spiritually is a state of , of equanimity where you have this core center of being that you are which is different from the, the mind which is always impressing upon that core state with its desires and fears, and anxieties and joys and needs and wants.”

Another participant referred to a Thomas Keating metaphor for the experience of releasing through Centering Prayer. Keating (2006) compares our consciousness “like a great river on the surface of which our superficial thoughts and experiences are passing like boats, debris, water skiers or other things. The river itself is the participation God has given us in His

own Being.” (p.47). The participant used Keating’s analogy to describe their own participation and the act of emotionally grounding themselves.

“Centering prayer is a practice of sitting quietly at the bottom of the stream and watching those boats go by and recognizing that I have a strong desire to get in a boat and drive it around. That is my angry boat that is my frustrated boat that is my overachiever boat that is my sorrowful-self boat, right? So it’s... the awareness is nothing more than a trained and practiced ability to recognize that I am not my emotions that they are separate...”

Results Summary

Participant responses highlighted the deeply interwoven nature of ST throughout through-out their lives, supporting the necessity to be examined carefully with tools suitable for its subtle nature. As well, the experience of participant’s immediacy is contradictory to Piedmont (2014) as he describes how ST motivates individuals to view their life in increasingly greater scopes of responsibility. While this broader scope of perspective is evident in the participant’s responses, it is not exclusive. In fact, there is great emphasis placed on what Piedmont would consider short event horizons of responsibility meaning “individuals may perceive their lives within the immediate context they inhabit, responding to the specific needs and demands of the here and now.” (p. 106) and is associated with lower ST. The combination of both a short and long term event horizon of perspective perhaps speaks to the ineffable nature of ST and Centering Prayer, as both develop gradually over time and both are necessary for the existence of the other. Instead of competing views, they are perhaps two-sides of the same coin, which is a part of the on-going unfolding nature of ST.

Discussion

As a young adult believer and researcher of this project, much of the themes conveyed throughout the data deeply resonate within my own faith experience. However, beyond my own experiences, the participant's responses point towards what can be seen as two proposed cultural-faith tensions we are facing today primarily drawing from Tarnas (1991) in reflection. One of which is that of the disembodied nature of our beliefs and the other is that of the repercussions of having a primarily Cataphatic focus within our faith practice. Throughout this last portion of this paper, I hope to shed light on these two areas of the spiritual restlessness as well as how the experience of Spiritual Transcendence through Centering Prayer enact healing and rest within these tensions.

Disembodied Faith

Centering Prayer invites the physicality of the believer to spiritual participation. Platonic philosophy has been considered an early root to Christianity and a strong cultural influence shaping the early church, and consequentially early theologians such as St. Augustine (Tarnas, 1991). While there is wisdom within the distinction between body and soul, the sharp dichotomy has been carried through the centuries creating a reconcilable tension for many Christians today, suggesting that our bodies only hinder our spiritual journey as it is the desires of the flesh that lead us astray. However Christians have disregarded their physical nature from being a part of God's goodness as "love of God could thrive only if love of self and love of the flesh were successfully conquered." (Tarnas, 1991, p. 144). The body has become territory to reclaim rather than a sacred and mysterious space we are enmeshed in. Restoration can be seen in the resolve participants felt towards themselves, as they learned to have greater self-compassion by spending time simply being. Therefore, Spiritual Transcendence practiced through Centering Prayer

enables a greater sense of self-knowledge and acceptance, opening new avenues of being and understanding of God's goodness.

However, we suffer more than just a body soul divide. We suffer a mind, cultural divide as Tarnas (1991) builds over the entirety of his writing. In the pursuit of truth, we have narrowed our way of knowing into only that which is mechanistic, observable and quantifiable. Reductively has become the only means to provide bona fide truth as "the intellectual effort to reduce all reality to the smallest measurable components of the physical world would eventually reveal that which was most fundamental in the universe." (p. 357). Consequentially, the value of our subjective experience evaporates, ultimately estranging us from ourselves (Tarnas, 1991). Centering Prayer is purely experiential, there is nothing to prove or produce from it, it shares many similarities as the subjective, it an internal process which cannot be truly known to another. The validation participants experienced through Centering Prayer and through the deep sense of connectedness to others and themselves serves as evidence for the irreducible truths that can only be known through embracing the subjective nature.

Cataphatic Practice: A Shelter from Mystery

This segues into the second major tension expressed throughout the data and that is the over-reliance on Cataphatic practice. As our culture has steeped within causality, measurable outcomes and productivity, such attitudes have also immersed the church. Historically, it has been a necessary step to retain some form of power and authority in the face of shifting paradigms as much Christianity fell under fierce scrutiny during the Scientific Revolution (Tarnas, 1991) and become pressed for scholastic validity (Cousins, 1987). As centuries passed, cultural influence only intensified as the necessity to remain relevant within the shifting ideals of

metaphysics and truth continued to grow. Christianity transitioned from stating that it was the truth during the scientific revolution, to fighting to say there simply is truth within the post-modern era. Perhaps resulting in the heavy focus on the apologetics of faith, the tangible acts of service. While the use of discursive practices to refine our understanding and provide concrete answer this could be seen as a means to appease a certain cultural climate rather than a modality to receive and commune with God. It seems, we have become insecure to come before God as only ourselves. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* describes “For a simple reaching out directly towards God is sufficient, without any other cause except himself.” (p.133) Therefore, the experience of Spiritual Transcendence through Centering Prayer enables rest beyond the cultural demand and focus of the church.

This leads me to a secondary conflict that has emerged from the idea that we have become fearful of not knowing, and experiencing the mystery of God. It is biblical to understand God as unknowable and mysterious as revealed in Isaiah 55:8-9 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (KJV). While Cataphatic practice is valuable, the complete reliance of it to define and execute spiritual practice ultimately ironically limits our way of knowing God, forever safeguarding him to knowable, logical, tangible experiences. Disallowing the mystery, spontaneity and even risk of an encounter with an unknowable uncontainable God.

A Cultural Spiritual Drought

Thus, bringing me to my last point, that is the combination of our post-modern cultural climate, and neglect of the apophatic as left a generation in search of spiritual depth. This is not a

new phenomenon, as reflected in Cousins (1987) describing an era of spiritual awakening within Western culture during the 1960s. Perhaps in the efforts to shelter Christians from being led astray into post-modern relativism, or hearsay from wandering too far into mystery and unknowing similar as Utterback (2013) described, the church has effectively barricaded itself from its own historical tradition, depleting richness and value in faith expression. Therefore, contemplative practice integrates the mystery, the body and the ineffable back into spiritual practice, leading to incredible breadth and dimension for the practitioner. While the crisis of our faith and culture runs historically deep, so does its remedy as an irreducible center remains within us.

Conclusion

Spiritual Transcendence through Centering Prayer is both drawing back into the centering of our being while being uplifted into multiple spheres of influence. As Piedmont describes it is indeed the recognition that “we are single threads in a larger tapestry of existence; although small and limited, each thread makes a unique contribution to the overall texture and imprint of the woven piece.” (p. 106). Yet, ST is not limited to a grand scope of being but inhabits the mundane, the seemingly profane and immediate. There are elements to ST that are grown simply by repetition such as Self-Awareness and Recognition of Fundamental Worth, while others such as Deeping Mystery and active compassion unfold quietly over time. In the words of one participant, this is eloquently described as they say:

“I am quite convinced that there is a transcendent element to all of creation that is a place that we necessarily have to live if we are to be full humans. It’s not special or mystical or other worldly it’s very tangible and normal and every day, and is an aspect of everything you do. It’s not something you need mountain top experiences to experience. It’s every conversation you have it’s every time you sit down to eat meals together with people or interactions in work and classrooms and each and all the various things you as an individual might be involved with. All

of those things have spiritual dimensions and intricacies and can be analysed and discussed and experienced on that level.”

Through this study, I too have become convinced that the Spiritual Transcendence is a necessary function and process we participate within along our own faith journey. By utilizing Centering Prayer it gathers the neglected pieces of being and places them back within their rightful role, helping bridge deep seated chasms experienced through our culture and neglected areas of faith.

Appendix of Items Attached

Item 1: Interview and research questions

The following list of questions in bold are questions designed as a qualitative adaptation of the ASPIRES scale. The intent of the questions are to address experiences of connectedness, universality, and prayer fulfillment felt throughout their lives between themselves, others, and God. The research question(s) following the interview question describing the questions purpose and relevancy to the researcher. Actual interview questions may not be verbatim to those listed, but will have the same intent and rationale. Only questions in bold font will be given to participants.

ITEM NO.1Interview Questions for The ExperienceOf Spiritual Transcendence Through Centering Prayer

1. **How would you describe your relationship to God based on practicing centering prayer?** Has the practitioner's connection with God deepened? Do they experience a sense of "divine indwelling".
2. **Could you describe any changes in your motivation to pray as you've practiced it over time?** Has prayer become an end in itself rather than a means to an end for the practitioner? Is there inherent value in prayer rather than the results?
3. **As you've practiced centering prayer can you comment on any changes in how you view your personal identity?** Has the practitioner developed a sense of the "true self" similarly described throughout existing literature? Have they experienced a decentering of the ego?
4. **Has centering prayer changed your understanding of who God is?** Has their doctrine shifted since participating in prayer? Have they ever received a sense of personal revelation about who God is?
5. **Can you describe how centering prayer is a meaningful practice?** How has prayer enhanced their sense of spiritual fulfillment? Has this discipline contributed to greater satisfaction in their lives spiritually?

6. **Can you identify ways centering prayer has influenced how you see your life as a part of a meaningful whole?** Does the practitioner feel connected to a greater reality?
7. **Do you feel a sense of connection to those who have passed away in your life?** Does the practitioner believe in a deep ongoing spiritual connection between human beings?
8. **Can you identify how centering prayer has changed the way you handle obstacles in your life?** Richard Rohr describes the “second gaze” which is a shift in perspective and interpretation of life events. He describes how the “first gaze” often comes from a place of self-centeredness, and human nature. However the “second gaze” comes from a place of compassion and is rooted ultimately in God. Allowing individuals to respond rather than merely react to adversity or frustration. Do practitioners find they have experienced this shift of perspective?
9. **Can you describe how centering prayer has influenced your attitude towards difficult people you encounter?** Has the objective value of others increased in the eyes of the practitioner? Do they experience a greater appreciation of others?
10. **Can you describe any spiritual difficulties you’ve experienced over the course of your prayer life and how you handled them?** Has the process of prayer been meaningful as a whole? How has the practitioner navigated different phases of spiritual development as they’ve prayed such as initial growth/fulfillment and the dark night of the soul?
11. **Has there been any content this interview hasn’t covered that you wish to share that has been important to your experience participating in Centering Prayer?** This question is a gesture of respect to the interviewee as the expert of their own experience. This question is also to be critical of my own research questions and their limitations.

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