

Chapter 7 - Unloading the Unconscious

Open Mind, Open Heart by Fr. Thomas Keating

Day 53 – October 23

A fifth kind of thought arises from the fact that through the regular practice of centering prayer the dynamism of interior purification is set in motion. This dynamism is a kind of divine psychotherapy, organically designed for each of us, to purify our unconscious and free us from the obstacles to the free flow of grace in our minds, emotions, and bodies.

Empirical evidence seems to be growing that the consequences of traumatic emotional experiences from earliest childhood are stored in our bodies and nervous systems in the form of tension, anxiety, and various defense mechanisms. Ordinary rest and sleep do not get rid of them. But with interior silence and the profound rest that this brings to the whole organism, these emotional blocks begin to soften up, and the natural capacity of the human organism to throw off things that are harmful starts to evacuate them. The psyche as well as the body has its way of evacuating material that is harmful to its health. The emotional residue in our unconscious emerges during prayer in the form of thoughts that have a certain urgency, energy, and emotional charge to them. You don't usually know from what particular source or sources they are coming. There is ordinarily just a jumble of thoughts and a vague or acute sense of uneasiness. Simply putting up with them and not fighting them is the best way to release them.

As the deep peace flowing from centering prayer releases our emotional blocks, insights into the dark side of our personality emerge and multiply. We blissfully imagine that we do good to our families, friends, and business or professional associates for the best of reasons, but when this dynamism begins to operate in us, our so-called good intentions look like a pile of dirty dishes.

We perceive that we are not as generous as we had believed. This happens because the divine light is shining brighter in our hearts. Divine love, by its very nature, accuses us of our innate selfishness.

Suppose we were in a dimly lit room. The place might look fairly clean. But install a hundred bulbs of a thousand watts each, and put the whole room under a magnifying glass. The place would begin to crawl with all kind of strange and wonderful little creatures. It would be all you could do to stay there. So it is with our interior. When God turns up the voltage, our motivation begins to take on a wholly different character, and we reach out with great sincerity for the mercy of God and for His forgiveness. That is why trust in God is so important. Without trust we are likely to run away or say, "There must be some better way of getting to Heaven."

Self-knowledge in the Christian ascetical tradition is insight into our hidden motivation, into emotional needs and demands that are percolating inside of us and influencing our thinking, feeling, and activity without our being aware of them. When you withdraw from your ordinary flow of superficial thoughts on a regular daily basis, you get a sharper perspective on your motivation, and you begin to see that the value systems by which you have always lived have their roots in prerational attitudes that have never been honestly and fully confronted. We all have neurotic tendencies. When you practice contemplative prayer on a regular basis, your natural resources for psychic health begin to revive and you see how the false self and its value systems are damaging your life. The emotional programs of early childhood that are buried in your unconscious begin to emerge into clear and stark awareness.