

## Simple Trust in God's Presence



**Cynthia Bourgeault**

“Prayer is talking to God”: with these words nearly all of us receive our first religious instruction. Certainly I did. As a child, I learned the usual first prayers and graces (“Now I lay me down to sleep” and “God is great, God is good. . .”), followed, a bit later, by the Lord’s Prayer and the Twenty-Third Psalm. I was also encouraged to speak to God in my own words and instructed that the appropriate topics for this conversation were to give thanks for the blessings of the day and to ask for assistance with particular needs and concerns.

But for all this, I was also one of the relatively rare few who also had it patterned into me that prayer was *listening* to God. Not even listening for messages, exactly, like the child Samuel in my favorite Old Testament story [1 Samuel 3:3–10], but just being there, quietly gathered in God’s presence. This learning came not from my formal Sunday School training, but through the good fortune of spending my first six school years in a Quaker school, where weekly silent “meeting for worship” was as an invariable part of the rhythm of life as schoolwork or recess. I can still remember trooping together, class by class, into the cavernous two-story meetinghouse and taking our places on the long, narrow benches once occupied by elders of yore.

Occasionally, there would be a scriptural verse or thought offered, but for long stretches there was simply silence. And in that silence, as I gazed up at the sunlight sparkling through those high upper windows, or followed a secret tug drawing me down into my own heart, I began to know a prayer much deeper than “talking to God.” Somewhere in those depths of silence I came upon my first experiences of God as a loving presence that was always near, and prayer as a simple trust in that presence.

Almost four decades later, when I was introduced to Centering Prayer through the work of Father Thomas Keating, it did not take me long to recognize where I was. In a deep way I’d come home again to that place I first knew as a child in Quaker meeting.

What I know now, of course, is that the type of prayer I was being exposed to during those meetings for worship was contemplative prayer. In Christian spiritual literature, this term all too often has the aura of being an advanced and somewhat rarified form of prayer, mostly practiced by monks and mystics. But in essence, contemplative prayer is simply a wordless, trusting opening of self to the divine presence. Far from being advanced, it is about the simplest form of prayer there is. Children recognize it instantly—as I did—perhaps because, as the sixteenth-century mystic John of the Cross intimates, “Silence is God’s first language.”

**Excerpt from:** Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cowley Publications: 2004), 4–5.

