

CULTIVATING OUR INNER ENVIRONMENT: THREE-CENTERED KNOWING

"We can never obtain peace in the outer world until we make peace within ourselves."

— DALAI LAMA

One of the more unusual outcomes of the pandemic is that a considerable number of people are now familiar, and even engaging, with well-being and self-care from a whole new perspective. Breathing and body scans, mindfulness meditations, loving kindness, heart-opening prayers and reflections are no longer seen solely as the domain of spirituality and religion or as something new age. As Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, put it in a recent podcast: "These practices have been embraced in a way no one could have foreseen. One could argue that there is a new understanding of contemplative consciousness emerging out of the great pause."¹ During the pandemic, and particularly due to isolation, the meaning of self-care has hugely evolved for individuals and society.²



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The Catholic tradition, as well as many other religions, emphasize that the foundation of well-being and self-care is cultivating inner peace through our relationship with God. We have arrived at a pivotal moment for our planet's environment, where this intentional practice has reached a new level of importance. Earth's survival may depend on the responsibility each one of us takes for maintaining our inner environment.³ Central to cultivating one's inner environment is the art of bringing attention to what is occurring in any given moment in our bodies, hearts and minds. This message is echoed in the three synoptic Gospels:

"What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus of Nazareth responded, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:36-37)

One interpretation of this response is Jesus naming specific centers: heart, mind and soul (which in translation includes the body). For Sr. Ilia Delio, OSF, PhD, Jesus is calling those who would follow him to a new consciousness that involves knowing and loving God with all of these three centers: heart, mind and body.⁴ This is the

path that leads us to fullness of life, to wisdom and an abiding inner peace that translates into all our relationships, including with the natural environment.

Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal minister, postulates that inner work and the wisdom this generates can be framed as Three-Centered Knowing — engaging heart, mind and body in a single, integral act of perception. She argues in *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* that for Orthodox Christianity and some aspects of Islam, wisdom hinges on the transition to a different mode of perception, classically referred to as "placing the head in the heart." The heart is understood not as the seat of our personal feelings or emotional lives, but as an expansive space of compassion and love. The Orthodox Greek and Russian traditions refer to the heart as "the organ of spiritual perception," and the healing of the heart as the engine of our inner (and outer) transformation. Contemporary neuropsychology supports this ancient wisdom. Conditioned feelings and emotional reactions, if not brought into awareness and a healing process, can miss the neurological shift that a person needs in order to move into the vastness of the expanded heart, with deeper capacities of peace, presence and authentic responsiveness.⁵

In Three-Centered Knowing, the head is not the mind as we usually think of it. Rather it's derived from 'nous' in Greek, meaning it includes the intuitive capacity, our ability to be in touch with or aware of the divine. The head can sometimes seem like the train of endless and mostly worthless thoughts that buzz around continuously, distracting us from our real mind and from presence. Evagrius Ponticus, a Desert Father who lived in the fourth century, wrote at great length on this "logis-moi," thoughts that lead us away from abiding in peace with "the God of all peace." (Romans 15:33) After multiple interviews with other Desert Mothers and Fathers, he listed the nine passions or temptations, which later became the Seven Deadly Sins, and the nine virtues that were the antidotes to these passions. Evagrius developed one of the first comprehensive diagnostic and ascetical, or in contemporary language, psycho-spiritual programs, to aid the transformation of what he called "misguided thinking." This was done through the practice of self-observation (awareness) and contemplation: to enable, with grace, a virtuous and peaceful mind leading to a state of nonattachment and surrender to God. The mind, then, is not the endless chitchatting of our thoughts but an expansive and receptive antenna to the signs and signals of the Spirit.

Of the three centers, it is the body as a way of knowing that seems the most difficult to understand. In *Radical Wholeness: The Embodied Present and the Ordinary Grace of Being*, Philip Shepherd calls the body or gut "the third brain." The body has a way of knowing that is different from the mind or the heart. Understanding one's internal environment is intimately connected to how well you can tap into what he calls "embodied knowing." Frs. Edwin McMahon, SJ, PhD, and Peter Campbell, SJ, PhD, contend in *Rediscovering the Lost Body-Connection Within Christian Spirituality* that the "mind's eye cannot easily penetrate this inner world of felt meaning" that is stored in our cells and tissues.⁶

Seeing the body as a partner in the quest for wisdom and inner peace requires a paradigm shift

for most of us. It can be helpful to think of the body as an interface between the inner subjective self and an objective world beyond the self. Sensitizing the body to become a fluid medium linking self and world, a role it seems purposefully designed for, gives our physical structure an integrative function far more prominent than its frequent dismissal as a machine.

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Martin Schmidt quotes Bourgeault: "I have learned through years and years of spiritual work that it's from a finely developed inner sensing of the body that you really get the information you need to make accurate discernments in your inner journey. Both the mind and the emotions are easily blindsided or manipulated by the personal will. But the [body] sensing center never lies. If I am making a decision and sense inner constriction, I know that no matter how much I try to convince myself that my preferred option is the correct one, in fact it is not. It has taken years to learn to discern from sensation."⁷ Our relationship with our body center begins with befriending and recognizing the perceptivity, guidance and capacity inherent in attending to the subtle presence of bodily intelligence. Our body prayers, work with sensations and sacred movement all deepen our relationship with this center. Cultivating our inner environment toward an expansive openness begins squarely in our capacity for embodiment.

When we intentionally align these three centers of knowing or intelligence from a place of attention and self-awareness, we are present. And to be present is to cultivate inner peace. Three-Centered Knowing can have a profound impact on waking us to the habitual, often unconscious

“Whenever your heart space, your mind space and your body space are all present and accounted for at the same time, you can experience pure presence, a moment of deep inner connection with the pure, gratuitous Being of anything and everything. It will often be experienced as a quiet leap of joy in the heart.”

— FR. RICHARD ROHR, OFM,
from *Open Heart, Mind and Body*

patterns of the ego that remain the prism — or prison — through which we perceive ourselves, others and the world. The required focus on the immediacy of breath and body awareness can enable a swift but gentle return to presence, allowing for more responsiveness and less reactivity in our relationships with ourselves, others and the earth. “When a person is poised in all three centers, balanced and alertly there, a shift happens in consciousness, we emanate from a deeper, steadier, and quieter place. We are present, fully occupying the now in which we find ourselves.”⁸ ‘Peace’ in the Bible can be interpreted as tying together as a whole, or when all essential parts are joined together. Inner peace, then, can be understood as a wholeness of heart, mind and body. Jesus invites us to peace multiple times. This means learning to live and cultivate peace first within ourselves. Then, we can radiate that peace to others, bring-

ing calmness and wisdom to the reality that every decision and action has an impact on our internal and external environments. By cultivating our inner landscape, we can be lights for healing the world. (Philippians 2:14-15)

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NOTES

1. “Another Name for Every Thing,” Center for Action and Contemplation, podcast March 6, 2021, <https://cac.org/podcast/another-name-for-every-thing>.
2. Anne D’Innocenzio and Sophia Rosenbaum, “In Pandemic Era’s Isolation, Meaning of ‘Self-Care’ Evolves,” The Associated Press, November 24, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/pandemic-eras-isolation-meaning-self-care-evolves>.
3. Sr. Ilia Delio, “Care for Creation,” recorded February 19, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmrxfjCI4oE>.
4. Sr. Delio, “Care for Creation.”
5. Daniel J. Siegel, *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*, (London: Bantam, 2010).
6. Frs. Edwin M. McMahon and Peter A. Campbell, *Rediscovering the Lost Body-Connection Within Christian Spirituality: The Missing Link for Experiencing Yourself in the Body of the Whole Christ is a Changing Relationship to Your Own Body*, (Minneapolis: Tabor Books, 2011), 30.
7. Martin Schmidt, “The Essentials of a Curriculum for Self-Understanding: The Body-Mind-Heart Framework in SSS,” Social Conscience and Inner Awakening, <https://martinschmidtinasia.wordpress.com/2018/07/14/the-essentials-of-a-curriculum-for-self-understanding-the-body-mind-heart-framework-in-sss/>.
8. Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 36.

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