



The Welcoming Prayer

Introduction

I was first introduced to the Welcoming Prayer as a way to handle the anxiety and stress of a challenging time in my life. My teacher encouraged me to practice the Welcoming Prayer in order to refocus my mind from:

- the past - “could of,” “should of” preoccupation, and
- the future - “what if” worst case scenarios.

My guide said it would help me return to the present moment, and connect with God, and he recommended a book by the Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault called The Wisdom Jesus, Transforming Heart and Mind-a New Perspective on Christ and His Message.

What is Welcoming Prayer?

From Contemplative Outreach:

“Welcoming Prayer is the practice that actively lets go of thoughts and feelings that support the false-self system. It embraces painful emotions experienced in the body rather than avoiding them or trying to suppress them. It does not embrace the suffering as such but the presence of the Holy Spirit in the particular pain, whether physical, emotional, or mental. Thus, it is the full acceptance of the content of the present moment. [In] giving the experience over to the Holy Spirit, the false-self system is gradually undermined and the true self liberated.” Father Thomas Keating

The Welcoming Prayer is a “powerful path for connecting the inner consent of Centering Prayer with the outer requirement of unconditional presence in daily life.” The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault, PhD.¹

The practice is an invitation to allow God to dismantle the emotional programs of the false-self and to heal the emotional wounds we’ve stored in the body -- even ones that we may not be very aware of. Welcoming Prayer seeks to deepen our relationship with God by consenting to God’s healing presence and action in all the triggers and stuff of every daily life.

What is the purpose of this type of prayer?

- To help us be more aware of God’s presence in the ordinary activities of our day
- To heal the human condition as it manifests itself in the active life
- To Help us observe our behavior patterns
- To free us from the unconscious false self energy centers
- To allow our energy to be transformed
- To gives us the freedom to respond rather than react.
- To help us be more aware of God’s presence in the ordinary activities of our day by allowing our bodies to be a teacher.

The Method

Focus and sink in.

¹ Quotes from Fr. Keating and the Rev. Bourgeault are taken from the Welcoming Prayer trifold produced by Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.

Welcome.
Let go.

Focus:

In the Contemplative Outreach of Phoenix workshop, this step is called “Feel and Sink Into.” They encourage us to realize that it is necessary that we be adept at reading the signals our body sends us. Starting this way gets us used to not thinking about the situation with the conceptual mind, but instead listening to our body. One way to practice this is called the “body scan.”

Cynthia Bourgeault describes the first step this way. Become physically aware of what’s going on in your body. Pay attention. Feel and sink into what you are experiencing this moment in your body. Feel the feeling. Don’t run away from it or fight it. Stay with this until you really experience a connection to the feeling or emotion on not just an emotional but also a physical level. Don’t try to change anything, just stay present. Do not use this occasion to analyze or justify yourself. If you do, you are back into your ego’s operating systems and the constant stream of stories.

“As in all good biofeedback work - being consciously present to your body guarantees that you won’t repress the emotion or dissociate from it.”²

“Paying attention to your body’s sensations keeps you from jumping into the mind and its dualistic games of good-guy/bad-guy, win/lose, either/or.”³

Welcome:

Our workshop leaders said our intention here is not for God to fix the situation, or the other person! Our goal is to have a different reaction to our own intense emotions. What we are welcoming is an opportunity to consent to the Divine in us.

We are to stay with this step until we start to feel a slight whiff of peace. That’s the start of the awareness of God’s presence and action. Then we are ready to move to “let go.” But, until then, sit with the feeling, until you experience a genuine sense that you welcome it, and you aren’t fighting against it. Affirm the rightness of where you are.

“After you can identify the hurt and feel it in your body, welcome it. Stop fighting it. Stop splitting and blaming. Welcome the grief. Welcome the anger. It’s hard to do, but for some reason, when we name it, feel it, and welcome it, transformation can begin.”⁴

“What you are welcoming is never an outer situation, only the feelings and sensations working within you in the moment.” The act of welcoming firmly roots us in the now.

Let go:

You move into the third step by repeating a mantra. The simplest method is to say, “I let go of this anger (or fear or pain, or frustration).”

or, “I let go of my desire for security, affection, control and embrace this moment as it is.”

or, the founder of this method, Mary Mrozowski, one of the founders of Contemplative Outreach, used:

² Cynthia Bourgeault, The Wisdom Jesus, Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 2008. 2 p. 178

³ Richard Rohr, The Franciscan Path of Descent Weekly Summary, June 13, 2015.

⁴ Ibid.

I let go my desire for security and survival.
I let go of my desire for esteem and affection.
I let go of my desire for power and control.
I let go my desire to change the situation.⁵

What is going on here? “The religious word for letting go is forgiveness. Forgiveness is giving up your investment in and identification with your own painful story. This comes from a deep place of inner freedom and awareness of goodness—God’s, your own, and the goodness of the person you choose to forgive. Now hand all of this pain—yours and the world’s—over to God. Let it go. Ask for the grace of forgiveness of the person who hurt you, of the event that offended you, of the reality of suffering in each life.

“I can’t promise the pain will leave easily or quickly. To forgive is not to forget. But letting go frees up a great amount of soul-energy that liberates a level of life you didn’t know existed. It leads you to your True Self.

“Forgiveness is giving up your investment in and identification with your own painful story. This comes from a deep place of inner freedom and awareness of goodness— God’s, your own, and the goodness of the person you choose to forgive.”⁶

Summary

For me, this practice is a way to quickly notice my negatives emotions by what is happening in my body. What are the signals my body is giving? With practice, the shift in my awareness happens quickly from my emotions to noticing the body tense and brace defensively. The body’s signals become like a sign post; they create a pause, reminding me to pray, to come back to this moment and be with God.

Welcome Prayer is meant to be practiced with the little things in life -- small, everyday frustrations like sitting in traffic, or waiting on hold for customer service. Practicing with the small things prepares us to be able to respond more intentionally to the larger frustrations that unfold in our lives rather than reacting habitually to them.

I enjoy Cynthia’s summary of this wisdom practice. She says the power by which Jesus could live and remain true to his path was the act of letting go, a “cosmic energy exchange.” It wasn’t only Jesus’ power, it’s what happens in the moment of complete surrender when “an explosion of presence goes off within us that is simultaneously an encounter with the wisdom master himself.”⁷

One final thought from Kabir Helminski, “Whoever makes all cares into a single care, the care for simply being present, will be relieved of all cares by that Presence, which is the creative power.”⁸

Jump in and try it out!

⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, The Wisdom Jesus, Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 2008, p. 180.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 181.

⁸ Kabir Helminski Living Presence: A Sufi Way to Mindfulness and the Essential Self (NY: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, 1992, p. 26.

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Additional Credits

Information on Welcoming Prayer in this handout is also drawn from:

- Material created by Ryan Cagle, Director of Youth and Young Adults, Church of the Epiphany, for the Flagstaff Youth Coop. Thanks Ryan!
- Workshops on Welcoming Prayer, conducted by Contemplative Outreach of Phoenix, held in April and May 2020.