

HeartMath

By Cynthia Bourgeault

When the Centering Prayer introductory talks were first put together twenty some years ago, thirty some, twenty-five, we didn't have at our hands all the wonderful scientific data that's now coming to us from neuro-meditation. But from neuro-meditation and some of the wonderful work that the Dalai Lama is funding and other people are funding, some of the work that the HeartMath Institute is doing, we're beginning to see actual, what you can call, scientific data that proves these statements that I've just said.

We can begin to see that meditation in general carves different neural pathways in your brain so that you can re-pattern old stress patterns, old stress habits by practices of meditation. And in Centering Prayer there's a very interesting way we're doing it. We're noticing and I've talked over and over about how the essence of Centering Prayer is patterning in this gesture of letting go, letting go letting go. Come to find out that there's now really interesting information from the HeartMath Institute that says that, as you all probably know, what we call our human brain is actually four brains in a sort of geosedimentary deposit: with this oldest reptilian brain at the base; and its kind of emotional limbic brain around that; our neocortex, you know our new brain; and then this prefrontal lobes that seem to govern the whole thing. And that whole new part of the brain is in really strong contact, electromagnetic and neural, with the brain and the heart.

So what the HeartMath Institute is showing us is that any time that we react to a stimuli in the world with an initial negative response of bracing, clinging, pushing, you know any sort of constriction, guess what part of the brain the stimulus gets processed in? The reptilian! And the reptilian is your old fight/flight brain. One of my friends characterized it, a sort of real, wise elder but also a "wiseguy," he says that given any stimulus in the world, the reptilian brain asks only three questions – do I eat it, run from it, or mate with it. And so that's still its domain and that you can find that even the most beautifully trained, theological people – popes and bishops and clergy – that if they get triggered in "I've gotta defend, I've gotta protect" they go right into their reptilian brain to process. And then all their erudition merely gives them new verbal weapons to abuse their enemy - a proof that theology per se won't make you civilized.

But what happens if we begin to learn to approach an initial stimuli in the world by softening, yielding, relaxing, letting be is that it takes a much more interesting route through the brains and the brain heart, and the heart and the brain come into entrainment. You can actually see the curves, the sine waves, come into resonance. Which means basically that all our horses are marching in the same direction. We have a lot more of our brain, particularly our evolutionary brain, at our disposal. So even without bringing in any God talk, if you can learn to approach a stimulus in your world by relaxing, letting go, opening rather than [clenching sound], you're gonna have a lot more of your creative intelligence available to you.

[A participant asks, "Is it described in a book somewhere?"]

Lots of books! I don't have the bibliography right at hand but one book I *love* is a book by a fellow named Joseph Chilton Pearce, who's a great elder, and he wrote one called *The Biology of Transcendence*. You can pick that up on the web and of course you'll find if you just start googling "heartmath" you'll find any number of things or hit up "mindfulness training" or the Dalai Lama, you'll just get right into the midst of it. It's the hot-breaking field out there today.

We now have a lot of actual demonstrable evidence that this patterning that were talking the about, the reason I said that this letting go is so important is because it does begin, in very important ways, to rewire you in the direction of opening to a creative intelligence. And if you believe, as mystical tradition has tended to believe, that the heart has some special role in mediating between our earthly humanness and what you might call the Holy Spirit – there's a lot of Orthodox, mystical theology that says the Holy Spirit resides in the heart – whatever you make of that, if you really sense that our heart is more than just a pump but is in some sense an organ for spiritual perception and alignment. then having the heart and the brain in alignment is a good thing.

So all this letting go and letting go and letting go that may seem to you like such a simple thing to do in meditation – where are the beautiful states of consciousness, the bliss, the Nirvana, all the good things the Hindus get – what about this letting go? It is beginning to rewire you so that you can be present in a deeper way and ultimately so that you'll be able to perceive, holistically, without having to set up an *other*, who's *other* and an *enemy*, and in a non-dual and global kind of way. That's where we're going with this so.

So this very simple action which is discovered more in your life than in the prayer itself, is actually a very important thing. And I believe that Jesus knew that when he made this kenosis, this radical letting go, the core of his teaching – the core of the path he practiced. He may not have had *HeartMath* photography available to him but he knew that the process of letting go, of not clinging, is absolutely essential to the onset of a kind of consciousness that can really see what he called the "kingdom" – the world in its wholeness and beauty and radiance.

So we aren't doing something small or a "side tour" here. This *will* catapult you in remarkably short order, right into the heart of the transformation, along a path which is intrinsically Christian through this letting go.

For Week 4, Session 1 of Centering Prayer with Cynthia Bourgeault, an Online Retreat at SpiritualityandPractice.com – transcribed from the recording of a live retreat titled "An Introduction to Centering Prayer," in Auckland, New Zealand, in October 2009. To purchase a full set of the live audio recordings please visit The Contemplative Society website at <http://www.contemplative.org/>.