

WHAT I LEARNED FROM FLICKIN' JOE — HOW THE MAN WHO NEARLY RAPED ME TAUGHT ME THE MEANING OF CENTERING PRAYER IN ACTION

By Jens Soring

I can't even remember what I screamed, so scared was I. But it must have been unusually persuasive; for Flickin Joe loosened his grip just enough for me to slide out of his hold and scamper down the stairs to the safety of my cell. Somewhere on the top tier I left behind my soap dish and my shampoo, my towel and my dignity – but not, thank God, my virginity.

Flickin' Joe had been stalking me for two or three months before finally catching and then releasing me next to the top tier shower, Bleft pod, Building 4, Mecklenburg, Correctional Center in Boydton, Virginia. I had not taken his prior advances as seriously as I should have because Joe was a “gunner”: a usually harmless sub-species of penitentiary fauna that gets its thrills from masturbating in sight of female correctional officers, not from raping “phat young white boys” like me. So long as Joe stayed busy flicking his enormous erection with his middle finger through his skin-tight shorts every time a female guard entered the pod day room, I figured I was safe.

Well, clearly I had been wrong. Instead of “gunning down” female officers, Flickin' Joe had apparently been pointing that cannon at me the whole time, no doubt feeling encouraged by my failure to object. Of course, even if I had understood the direction of his amorous interest, I might not have found the courage to approach a man literally twice my size and ask him to lay down his weapon, as it were.

So Joe almost certainly felt fully within his rights as a convict to throw me against the top tier railing one morning as I was coming out of the shower, to put me in a “full nelson” wrestling hold from behind with his erection pressed into my lower back, and to growl in my ear, “What you gonna do if I drag you in my cell right now?” Perhaps he was even a little surprised

when I yelled out some sort of protest; I do not know. But I do know that Flickin Joe let me go, and that makes him a rare gentleman indeed. According to a recent Ohio University study, up to ten percent of America's two million prisoners are sexually assaulted each year, so I was outrageously fortunate to escape the clutches of penitentiary love on this occasion.

Now, why are you reading about this disgusting but rather mundane incident of prison life in a nice Christian publication like Justice Reflections? And what could these depths of perversion and violence possibly have to do with Centering Prayer? Patience, my dear readers, patience – all will become clear. The fact is that, in an odd sort of way, Flickin' Joe's assault on me turned out to be a turning point for me, an important step on the road that would eventually lead me to an unusual scriptural way of applying the contemplative mind-set developed in Centering Prayer to daily life and its seemingly unspiritual challenges. Thus the story of how good fruit grew from such unpromising seed may have some relevance for your life, too.

After all, you are a prisoner as much as I am. My penitentiary may be more obvious than yours, but you would be an exceptional (and possibly mistaken) human being indeed if you too did not bump up against the walls of your own jail cell once or twice a day. Your prison may consist of a physical disability or addiction; a grief or guilt that drags you down more than the heaviest ball and chain; or an unexpected attack on your sense of identity, such as a bitter divorce or an episode of mental disorder. To you, your metaphorical chains are just as real and just as painful as my literal ones, and the only important or interesting question is whether we can struggle through to a kind of freedom in spite of our very different prisons.

If you are a practitioner of Centering Prayer, then you are already aware of the subtle but genuine and profound liberating effect of contemplative spirituality. Of course our inner and outer chains do not simply vanish in a puff of prayer – certainly mine haven't! – but instead we begin to fade away. As our contemplative practice deepens, the “false self's” physical, emotional and intellectual attachments to the world become weaker and weaker, and eventually even the concept of a “self” distinct from God is seen to be empty. Each of us is a wave on the ocean's surface: beautiful, unique and important, but certainly not separate from the Whole which gives us our existence. This insight, internalised in the very depths of our souls through Centering Prayer, carries over from

our seated sessions to our daily lives and helps us become less driven, more relaxed, not so “attached”. All this we know for ourselves by direct experience, if we perform Centering Prayer diligently.

But then reality throws us a surprise that disturbs our contemplative calm, and – whoosh! – we’re back in the little prison of our self’s desires and aversions. We may have learned to stop grasping and rejecting thoughts and emotions during prayer, but how do we cope with a loved one’s thoughtless remark which instantaneously sends us back into the dungeon of remembered childhood traumas and lifelong emotional issues? And can Centering Prayer really help us with the Flickin’ Joes of this life?

Our spiritual forefathers and mothers would have answered that question with a resounding “yes”. In the fourth century, John Climacus observed in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* that “the man who has entered stillness...but who fails to see how it benefits him daily is either practising it in the wrong way or is being robbed of it by self-esteem” (emphasis added). A thousand years later Magdeburg claimed to see “all things in God and God in all things” – including, presumably, in Flickin’ Joe and his ilk. And only a few decades ago, Henri Nouwen – another practitioner of the prayer of quiet, see *Life of the Beloved* – left Princeton to serve the handicapped as a resident caregiver in a L’Arche community.

What these contemplatives learned through silent prayer – to recognise God’s hand in every facet of creation – is a lesson I had to learn at Flickin’ Joe’s hands. At the time he attacked me, I was in fact entirely unfamiliar with the writings of Thomas Keating, much less Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Actually, I was not even a Christian then, nor did my salvation from his clutches induce a miraculous, on-the-spot conversion. My primary reaction to his attempted assault was merely to start lifting weights fanatically, almost obsessively – as if a few extra pounds of muscle could have protected me from a Goliath like Joe! Through providence and God’s occasionally wicked sense of humour, however, it was somewhat neurotic passion for pumping iron that taught me to recognise the divine light shining through even the man who offered to “drag you in my cell right now”.

Of course I planned none of this and, in fact, only understood the significance of my experience much later. At the time, it seemed no more than a coincidence – and a highly unpleasant one, at that – when I stepped out onto my prison housing unit’s recreation yard one windwhipped winter

morning and found no one else there but Joe. The smart thing to do would have been to turn right around and re-enter the building, But I have never been good at doing the smart thing, and I wanted to lift weights – so I stayed. He could work on his biceps over there, I could pump up my deltoids over here, and neither need say a word to the other, right?

Wrong, Sooner or later in the great divine scheme of things, we must all pay proper attention to our pectorals. And that means doing bench presses, and those require a “spotter” to back up the lifter, and most of those cold winter mornings there were only two of us on the yard: Flickin Joe and I.

We both must have faced the same quandary then: should I avenge my injured pride by splitting Joes’s skull with a dumbbell while he was struggling with his “max” weight? Should Joe knock me out cold and “snatch my fine white booty” there on the yard, as he had neglected to do next to the top tier shower? Both of us apparently answered “no”; lifting weights was more important to us than revenge or lust. So we grunted and sweated a lot together, and eventually spoke a few words, and in the end even had a few, monosyllabic conversations between sets.

And guess what? Flickin’ Joe turned out to be not such a terrible fellow. He knew a great deal about doing time and virtually nothing about anything else – including the moral inappropriateness of attempting to force intercourse on others, a concept which seemed to surprise him. Years later, when I heard that Joe was dying of AIDS in Greensville Correctional Center, I actually said a little prayer for him.

But it took several more years before I finally recognised and understood the gift Joe had given me, He had allowed me to penetrate to the very heart of Jesus’ revolutionary message to the world:

“Love your *enemies*... If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them ... But love your enemies, ... and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked” (Luke 6:27, 32, 35: emphasis added).¹

This quite literally unnatural love is what sets Christian agape apart, and Joe was the first “enemy” on whom God let me practise it – in a very primitive, dim and unconscious, but nevertheless genuine way.

Even so, I do not think I would have absorbed this lesson were it not for the gradual change of perspective induced by Centering Prayer, which I began

practising roughly six years after Flickin' Joe and I parted ways. A poem attributed to Thomas Merton expresses this contemplative world-view more beautifully than I ever could:

“Life is this simple.
We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent
And God is shining through it all the time.
This is not just a fable or a nice story.
It is true.
If we abandon ourselves to God
And forget ourselves.
We see it sometimes
And we see it maybe frequently.
God shows Godself everywhere,
In everything,
In people and in things and in nature and in events.
It becomes very obvious that God is everywhere and
In everything and we cannot be without God.
It is impossible.
The only thing is that we don't see it.”²

We “don't see it,” that is, until we learn to see it, through Centering Prayer. And the true test is not whether we can see the Divine Spirit in a beautiful sunrise – you don't need Centering Prayer for that! – but whether we can see God in Flickin' Joe. Or, to put this in Christ's words: can we “love our enemies”?

As Christians, and especially as practitioners of Centering Prayer, the answer to that question must be “yes”. But sharpening our contemplative eyesight until we see “God show(ing) Godself everywhere,/In everything” requires not only the gift of divine grace but also considerable cooperation from us. One form of this cooperation with grace is, of course, our dedication to the discipline of Centering Prayer, which cleans the lenses of our inner eyes. And another form of cooperation with God, I would suggest, could be to expose ourselves deliberately to people and situations which seem ugly and unspiritual, simply to practise our new vision.

In a way, that is precisely what we are already doing with internal distractions during Centering Prayer. When one the “false self's” hungers, desires or clever ideas disturbs our inner calm, we let it go and return to

our prayer word, our contemplative focus. The longer we practise this, the better we get at it — so why not apply the same principle to external distractions and disturbances?

It is not difficult to imagine how such a spiritual discipline might work. We could learn to let go of our fear of a particularly frightening person, say, and return to our contemplative focus on “God ... shining through” that person. As in Centering Prayer, the effectiveness of this hypothetical spiritual discipline would depend on repetition and dedication. By practising to “love our enemy” over and over on purpose, as a discipline, we would eventually learn to see God in him or her naturally and effortlessly.

Strangely enough, this imaginary spiritual technique is no quirky theory of mine. Father Thomas Keating, the co-founder of the Centering Prayer movement, actually practises this method, as does Father Richard Rohr, another great teacher and author. Even I have used it successfully, though I did not know it at the time!

What all three of us do to hone our contemplative vision is to practise seeing God in convicts. Father Keating holds workshops in Folsom Penitentiary in California, Father Rohr has an active prison ministry, and I ... we, I lifted weights with Flickin’ Joe, the man who nearly raped me. And the odd thing is: this technique works! Once you learn how to spot that glimmer of divine light in a grizzled veteran of the Big House doing twenty-to-life for serial aggravated sexual battery, it is surprisingly easy to see God in virtually anyone else.

Of course neither Fathers Keating and Rohr nor I came up with this ‘new’ spiritual discipline. It was Jesus who made a habit of seeking out tax collectors, sinners, lepers and other outcasts; he undoubtedly enjoyed discovering the Spirit even in the unlikeliest of vessels. What is sometimes overlooked, however, is that Christ also and specifically sought out prisoners — men (and women!) just like Flickin’ Joe.

The first Gentile he saved was the Gerasene demoniac, who “had often been chained hand and foot” until his banishment to the makeshift town lock-up in the local graveyard (Mark 5:3). Later Jesus intervened to stop the execution of a woman who, under the laws of her society, clearly deserved the death penalty (John 8:1-11). And in his last few hours on earth Christ gave no ringing, eternal sermon from the cross but spent his time conversing with “two men, both criminals,” on the crosses next to his (Luke 23:32).

Even during his preaching ministry, Jesus did not neglect to mention prisoners, though we often neglect to notice those passages. His very first public proclamation of his mission, immediately after leaving the desert and its devilish temptations, mentioned four groups of needy people to whom God had sent him: “the poor, ... prisoners, ... the blind, ... (and) the oppressed,” with prisoners listed in second place, not last (Luke 4: 18,19). And in his famous Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus directly identified himself with prisoners: “I was ... in prison and you did not look after me ... Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me”. (Matthew 25:42, 43, 45).

Now, I cannot pretend that I “look(ed) after” Flickin’ Joe in the sense that Christ meant when I pumped iron with him after he assaulted me. Perhaps our grunted conversations led him to the revolutionary insight that rape is not such a fine thing; perhaps not. But at the very least, someone – I – chose voluntarily to spend time with him, to treat him as a (weightlifting) partner instead of a bully to be shunned and feared. And I cannot help but believe that this experience gentled him just a little and – if I had been a better brother to him – that it might have changed the direction of his life.

This matters because, like it or not, whatever I did for Flickin’ Joe, I did for Christ. Not only that: whatever I did for Flickin’ Joe, I did for myself. Learning to see God in Joe’s face brought me into closer contact with the divine Light in me. My time on the prison recreation with him was a very early (and unconscious) case of contemplative spirituality in action.

And all of this applies to you as much as it does to me. Earlier in this article I suggested that all of us are prisoners of one kind or another, though your prison presumably is not quite as literal as mine. Centering Prayer has brought light to some of the inner chains you wear and has already begun to free you of them. Now that you are experiencing this growing sense of spiritual liberation, perhaps the time has come to reach out to others – to the Gerasene demonic, to the woman caught in adultery, to Flickin’ Joe – and to help free them of their literal chains.

It doesn’t take much: an hour a week as a literacy volunteer at your local jail. An afternoon every other weekend stuffing newsletters into envelopes for an anti-death-penalty organisation. Or hiring a parolee in your business, which incidentally entitles you to significant federal tax breaks.

Of course you will be disappointed – just as in Centering Prayer, when you drift off your prayer word. But you will know what to do: simply let go whatever problem arises in prayer or in life, and return to your focus: God, the God who is in all things and all people. If you stay true and stay focused, you can learn to see him everywhere.

That’s what I learned from Flickin’ Joe, anyway.

Jens Soring, inmate I.D. 179212, has served seventeen years of his two life sentences for double murder. His first book, “The Way of the Prisoner — Breaking the Chains of Self through Centering Prayer and Centering Practice”, will be released in the near future. His current address can be obtained at 1-800-467-4943. The Department of Corrections spells his name “Soering.”

References

1. Holy Bible, New International Version, (East Brunswick, NJ: International Bible Society, 1973, 1978).
2. Quoted without attribution in Esther de Waal, “Attentiveness,” (Nashville, TN: Weavings — A Journal of the Christian spiritual Life, Vol. XVII, Number 4, July/August 2002).