

practice the pause

JESUS' CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE,
NEW BRAIN SCIENCE, AND WHAT IT
MEANS TO BE FULLY HUMAN

A STUDY GUIDE BY CAROLINE OAKES

WELCOME TO THE STUDY GUIDE FOR *PRACTICE THE PAUSE*.

I am offering this study guide as an invitation to you to engage with the text of *Practice the Pause* through conversation with your own inner voice (and with others, should you decide to use this guide in a group setting).

In the spirit of *Practice the Pause*, I invite you to use the prompts of this study guide as opportunities to settle into momentary, reflective pauses, either by journaling on your own after each chapter, or by reflecting on the questions all together upon completion of the book, or by sharing with others if you are part of a book group.

Through the suggestions presented here, I would also like to introduce you to a new kind of book study group that I discovered when I attended seminary. I noticed a difference in the tone and tenor of the book groups there as compared with the book groups I had become used to over the years. The seminary study groups were modeled on a format that encourages both individual and group spiritual discernment, as explained in the book *Grounded in God*, written by leaders of Listening Hearts Ministries.

By incorporating creative silence, imagination, intuition, attentive listening, scripture, and prayer, book groups based on this spiritual discernment format can engage at a personally meaningful level of sharing and awareness. Through this approach, we not only study the chosen text, but in a very real way, we are able to study ourselves through the context of the book.

In whatever ways you may choose to use this study guide, I wish you abundant blessings on your practice of the centering pause!

So let us begin . . .

I would like to express my thanks to the Rev. Nancy Dilliplane for her assistance in formulating the prompts in this study guide.

INTRODUCTION

“What if we allowed ourselves to take that pause and listen to the still, small voice calling us to a more soul-nourishing rhythm of work and rest, of deeper connection, of space for quiet, and of living into our life’s potential?”

- What does “a more soul-nourishing rhythm of work and rest” look like to you? Take some time to imagine having a conversation with your still, small voice. Describe how it would go. What would you say? What would your still, small voice say back to you?

“Sometimes when we talk of God, the simple term ‘God’ can seem overly conceptual, where ‘the Spirit of God’ seems to speak to a living reality.”

- Describe what you sense is the difference between “God” and “the spirit of God.” What is your experience of each in your own life?

AWAKENING THE HEART

Chapter 1

We Are Human, We Are Divine

“Oksana remembered that her grandmother knelt down so they could be very close. Then her grandmother began to whisper to her all about ‘this wonderful thing called God.’ Her grandmother’s eyes were full and twinkling. She told Oksana that God loves her. She told Oksana that God is with her always. She told Oksana that ‘this loving God’ is all around her, and in her, and in everyone, and in everything.”

- Think back to when you first remember experiencing God in your life. Describe the setting and how you remember feeling. When have you learned about or discovered something that you already knew but had no words for? What image or emotions do you associate with that home-coming?

Richard Rohr says: “You (and every other created thing) begin with your unique divine DNA, an inner destiny as it were, an absolute core that knows the truth about you . . . an *imago Dei* that begs to be allowed, to be fulfilled, and to show itself. Historically, it was often called ‘the soul.’”

- Describe some aspects of yourself that are uniquely you. Be sure to describe some of the gifts others have often mirrored back to you.

“It is stunning to consider that, with the exception of Christianity, every major world spiritual tradition has had its own universally understood and nameable ‘path’ of transformation.”

- Has your experience of Christianity been one of a path of transformation? If it has been, can you describe how you have been transformed and in what ways?

“It was easy to convince ourselves that we as humans could never attain the wisdom and equanimity and calm of Jesus . . . never come close to attaining his divinity.”

- How were you formed/brought up/informed to think about Jesus—as a savior or as a divine/human wisdom teacher who showed the way to claim our own divinity? What is new for you in the Eastern Christian idea of *theosis*?

Chapter 2

It’s Not “Repent,” It’s *Metanoia*

“What if, throughout our lives, every time we had heard the call to ‘repent,’ we understood it to be instead an impassioned call to try to ‘wake up, see beyond your mind . . .?’”

- Spend a few moments considering which emotions are brought up in you when you are told to repent. What emotions are brought up in you when you are invited to see beyond your usual way of thinking? Imagine you were taught in Sunday school to see beyond your mind rather than to repent. What would be different in your life, if anything? How does retranslating *repent* as “see beyond your mind” open up the gospels for you?

“Cynthia Bourgeault describes *metanoia* as the ‘clarion call to a radical shift in consciousness that underlies all of Jesus’ teaching’ and as the *central* message of Jesus.”

- Do you agree? Spend some time pondering what you feel is the central message in the message of Jesus. Describe what you feel is the central message to you particularly in your life today.

Chapter 3

The Jesus Formula: The Centering Pause Practice

Father Thomas Keating says, “In Jesus’ formula for waking up to who we are . . . he suggests entering this inner room. Then he says, ‘shut the door,’ meaning stop the interior dialogue. Get free or detached from our over-identifications with our thoughts, experiences, past life, future hopes. . . . [Here we are] in the process of awakening to the divine image within us, where faith, hope, charity, the divine indwelling are sitting, so to speak, in our unconscious, gathering dust, waiting to be used. And they can’t come into full action until our over-identification with the false self and its programs for happiness have been reduced.”

- Take a few minutes to imagine going into the inner room of you and shutting the door and being there, just you and God. Describe what this feels like to you.

“Jesus is ‘a perfect example . . . of human action from a contemplative center.’”

- What would it mean to you to live your life acting from a contemplative center?

“That simple movement of releasing the hold of the fight/flight ego response to then return to the Divine creates a pause, a space.”

- Describe a time when you have experienced this kind of pause that makes you pull back on an impulse. What did this moment of pause feel like to you physically and emotionally?

AWAKENING THE MIND

Chapter 4

Wired for Transformation: Our Brain and Our Mind

“‘Neurons that fire together, wire together.’ . . . Certain contemplative practices activate the brain in a way that can enable us to calm our own egoic fight/flight responses, to change our overreactive behavior patterns, and to cultivate the capacity to choose how to respond to stressful situations through a fuller awareness of what is happening in our inner and outer worlds.”

- What stands out to you most as you learn more about the “brainy” side of contemplative practice and the Hebb’s law phenomenon (when neurons fire together, they wire together)?
- Describe a particular fight/flight behavior of yours that you think gets in the way of being who you would like to be in your life or in your primary relationships.

“Contemplative practice makes us more human.”

- Describe in what ways you think contemplative practice might make you more human.

Chapter 5

Flipping Your Lid: A Close-Up Look

“Understanding the brain mechanisms at work in a flip-your-lid, stressful response can help us understand our own responses in those moments.”

- Is this true for you? Have you ever noticed catching yourself before overreacting in a stressful situation? What did that feel like, and how did it change the situation? What do you think enabled you to hesitate before lashing out?

“Prominent researchers in the field agree that the converging evidence is compelling—meditation should no longer be considered simply something nice to have as your daily practice. Meditation is a must-have.”

- Describe your own thoughts about this revolution in neuroscience and these opinions regarding the necessity of meditation and wordless prayer as a way to regulate emotions, particularly fight/flight. Describe how learning the “brainy” side of Jesus’ practice has or has not affected your interest in pursuing your own contemplative practice.

Chapter 6

Contemplative Neuroscience: Confessions of a Closet Meditator

“These fMRI studies eventually confirmed what neuroscientists themselves now describe as the ‘revolutionary’ phenomenon of *neuroplasticity*—the ability of the brain’s neural circuitry to change as a result of behavior and environment. Following this discovery, several now-prominent neuroscientists who for decades had been ‘closet meditators,’ eagerly went to work conducting neuroscience studies that soon produced conclusive and compelling evidence.”

- Is engaging in contemplative practice, wordless prayer, or meditation something you feel you need to keep to yourself as well, even in today’s world? Are you aware of pressure steering you away from meditation and other contemplative practices? What do you imagine is the basis of this fear?

“These studies are responses to the seed of hope the Dalai Lama planted thirty years ago—that scientific knowledge of the power of meditation and other contemplative practices might enable these practices to finally go mainstream and reach a worldwide audience looking for ways to manage stress and to cultivate compassion and well-being.”

- In what ways do you think the Dalai Lama may have planted a seed of hope that contemplative practices might now “go mainstream”?

New York Times science writer Sharon Begley said, “As these discoveries of neuroplasticity, of self-directed neuroplasticity, trickle down to clinics and schools and plain old living rooms, the ability to willfully change the brain will become a central part of our lives—and of our understanding of what it means to be human.”

- What do you think about the possibility that engaging in our own steady, transformative contemplative practice may even bring about what Begley calls the *exceptional states* of each of these virtues in ourselves? How do you think such progress would change your life and the world?

Chapter 7

The Spiritual and the Secular: It’s about Connection

In their well-recognized 2018-published paper, renowned neuroscience scholars Denis Larrivee and Luis Echarte point out that “while Christian meditation shares methods and experiences common to secular mindfulness, and even more so with Eastern spiritual religious exercises, in contrast, Christian meditation adopts de facto a *relational* praxis . . . to a higher and universal order.”

- Describe relational and transcendent qualities you experience in contemplative practices, a quiet twenty-minute Centering Prayer sit, say, or pausing to take in a surprise view of a blossoming tree in springtime.

“With the growing prevalence of spiritually-based therapies in pastoral counseling and psychotherapy settings, a number of neuroscientists and neuropsychologists are working to catch up on their scientific evidence-gathering, anticipating yet another new frontier emerging in contemplative neuroscience studies: the effect of *Christian centering meditation practices* on the brain and behavior.”

- Describe the ways that Christian centering meditation practices could complement psychotherapy.

AWAKENING IN THE WISDOM TRADITION

Chapter 8

Jesus the Rabbi: First-Century Jewish Spirituality

Rabbi Rachel Baranblat says, “In *tefiah* [Jewish liturgical prayer] we take a long deep look inside ourselves, to see who we most truly are, to become aware of our consciousness and our thought processes, and to guide ourselves toward becoming the people we most intend to be.”

- Is this your experience of the effects of prayer in your life? If it is not and you would like it to be, describe ways you would like to practice prayer that may bring this self-awareness.

“With even this brief glimpse into how all-encompassing the *Sh’ma* is in the Jewish world, we can see that Jesus not only fully embraced and prioritized the *Sh’ma* as the paramount principle for society to live by. We can see that Jesus *himself* was living into the essence of the *Sh’ma* in the way he so consistently and intentionally turned to God in both his contemplative life and in his active life of engagement with others.”

- If awareness of the *Sh’ma* is new to you, describe how this new insight might shift your understanding of Jesus’ full orientation toward God. Now describe what you imagine the effect might be of being always in awareness of loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and in what ways that might change your daily interactions.

Chapter 9

The Call of the Natural World in Jesus’ Time and Now

“The gospel writers were letting everyone know that Jesus was regularly (one gospel uses the word ‘forever’) going to places where everyone knew one goes to be in the presence and action of the spirit of God. This would be like us today hearing that someone was going on a retreat to the Isle of Iona in Scotland, or to Rumi’s tomb in Turkey, or to Lourdes in France, or even to a favorite magical bookshop to linger for a while for rest and restoration. Notice how even imagining such a spot settles the soul.”

- Think for a moment about a favorite “thin place” you have experienced in your life. Can you describe that feeling? Can you describe the feeling you have when you venture into a favorite, magical bookstore?

Author Victoria Loorz says, “The Sacred calls us into the Wild, and the Wild calls us into the Sacred.”

- Describe what it feels like to you when you are completely immersed in the natural world—on a mountain hike, swimming in the ocean, taking in the beauty of a sunrise or sunset, or even just being under the sky. Think of a time when a place in the natural world has spoken to you. What was this like? What was your response? Imagine yourself once again in that place, and spend a few minutes in conversation with the Sacred there.

Chapter 10

Time Alone with God: Jesus Practicing the Pause

Author Barbara Brown Taylor says: “We live an infinite, luminous web of *relationship* that animates everything that is. . . . It is not enough for me to proclaim that God is *responsible* for all this unity. Instead, I want to proclaim that God IS the unity.”

- Describe what you think Taylor means when she says God is the unity of the web of relationship that animates everything.

“[The image of the healing bones on the medical poster] was what Carl Jung meant when he talked about the ‘innate push toward wholeness’ that is within each of us. What I was looking at here was the miraculous force, the energy, the *love*, really, that heals and reconciles all things. From scraped knees, to broken relationships, to even our own brokenness, the world is rigged for healing love and for connection. I suddenly got that.”

- Describe a situation when you may have felt this inside push toward wholeness that Jung speaks of, a time when you felt nudged, even catapulted, into a situation that brought you some growth, healing, or wholeness. Are there annoying personal situations or people in your life that you find continue to disrupt your rhythm in ways that might be pushing you to heal in some way?

“In one of Krista Tippett’s *On Being Project* conversations, poet Naomi Shihab Nye offers a captivating and I think spot-on definition of what can be an oh-so-difficult word to capture or define—contemplation. Nye describes contemplation as a ‘long, loving look.’”

- See what happens when you look up for a moment and take a “long, loving look” at something or someone. Can you describe this feeling? How might this phenomenon change your understanding of contemplation?

“We begin to understand Jesus’ life and ministry not as something to believe in but something to incorporate into our day-to-day life.”

- Describe who Jesus has been in your life—one to believe in, or to become like, or neither, or both? Be sure to describe each way of relating to Jesus.

Chapter 11

Contemplation in Action: Jesus Practicing off the Mat

“Jesus’ profound inner contemplative life of continual prayer in God informed and infused Jesus’ outer active life of radically inclusive, self-giving love toward others. We know this message was clear, not hidden, for earliest Christians. Some even immediately saw this message as the transformative, contemplative way of *theosis*, ‘divinization,’ of realizing their own divine nature through the practice of Jesus.”

- Describe what it means to you to embody “radically inclusive, self-giving love.”

“I reminded [the children] that all these things that God has created, all these ways that God loves us in every day, all are *inside* this little roll. At this point, I was holding the roll up at my eye level, reverently, on the open palms of my hands, and I said, ‘See, then, how this little roll is *filled* with God’s love for us? We open it up,’ I broke it at this point, ‘and we know that what is inside is God’s love for us. It is *holy*.’”

- What do you think of this idea of the love of God being in bread and wine? What does it mean to be aware of God whenever we eat or drink?

“[Together at the Last Supper] Jesus is giving his disciples a glimpse of how the inner contemplative life can flow into the outer lived life so completely that we can see the Christ, the Divine, in all things.”

- Describe how your inner life is in service to your outer life, if you feel it is. Describe changes you would want to manifest in your inner life, if any, and how they would affect your daily life.

Author Richard Rohr says: “What if Christ is a name for *the transcendent within* of every ‘thing’ in the universe? What if Christ is the name for the immense spaciousness of all true Love?”

- Describe what you have come to know as the difference between Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ that Rohr speaks of here. Describe how you experience the Christ in your life and in others.

Chapter 12

Between Fight and Flight: The Third Way of Jesus

“Throughout the gospels, Jesus’ centering pause practice shows us how an intentional practice of pausing and releasing whatever egoic impulse is moving us off center eases our instincts for self-preservation and allows our inner, flawed motivations that present obstacles to deeper awareness to fall away. We are able to respond to the stressors of our life not by fighting or fleeing but from a third way, from our divine indwelling, from the ‘infinite within.’”

- Describe a time you have reconnected with God—“re-membered” yourself—and been able to choose a third way.

“While our [defensive, fight/flight] behaviors may have served us and even protected us when we were young, they now can get in the way of us leading the lives to which we aspire.”

- Describe how certain behaviors of yours have protected you as a child but no longer serve you as an adult and, in fact, get in the way of who you would like to be in your life.

“But rather than fight or flee, Ananias not only goes to Saul; he lays his hands on him and calls him ‘brother.’ It is said that then ‘immediately something like scales’ fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see.”

- Spend a few moments imagining what this moment might have been like for Saul, and describe how he must have felt. Now describe how Ananias must have felt in this moment. Recall and describe a moment when you have forgiven someone or when someone has forgiven you.

Chapter 13

Ancient/New Teachers: The Desert Mothers and Fathers

“Christianity became an identifier rather than an invitation into a transformed consciousness. The irony was as stark seventeen hundred years ago as it is today: The way of Love was being co-opted, institutionalized, and used as a means of exerting power by the reigning empire.”

- Can you relate to the early Christian experience of having their faith co-opted and misrepresented? Try to describe what this must have felt like to them, as well as ways you feel this way, if you do.

“These were an Eastern Christian people whose first glimpse of Jesus of Nazareth was unencumbered by formalized doctrine or by societal overfamiliarity.”

- Describe what you imagine a clear and fresh look at the person of Jesus might have been like.

“The particular and unique spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers can be for us a school of radical love and nonjudgmental tenderness, teaching us how *to be* like Jesus.”

- Describe any particular practices and/or ways of being that were practiced by the desert mothers and fathers that may be an inspiration to you.

Chapter 14

Just Being with God

“And as simple as it sounds, the practice of just being in quiet in God’s presence a few minutes a day is the foundation of a profound inward spiritual journey. This is a journey where you can come to be reacquainted with your innermost self, the part of you that is easily forgotten in all the busyness of each day. This is a journey where you can be reacquainted with that of God within you, with the divine indwelling in you that has been there all the time.”

- Describe what resistance you might feel to practicing just being in quiet in God’s presence a few minutes a day. What or who might help draw you toward such a practice?

“The life-changing power of having an intentional and steady contemplative spiritual practice of ‘resting in God’, and without words, is not a concept the majority of Western Christians in the twenty-first century grew up learning about.”

- Describe your experience of growing up in terms of how you were taught to engage with God and how you experienced God.

Chapter 15

Reading with God: When Scripture Shimmers

“As writer Maria Popova beautifully recalls, ‘A single poetic image can lift us from the plane of our storied worldview toward the gasp of a whole new vista, where in the spacious silence of the unimagined we imagine ourselves afresh.’ In the gift of that ‘spacious silence,’ we are given the gifts of insight and imagining.”

- Describe a time you may recall when a phrase or word or person or moment brought this pause, this “gasp.” Ponder what it might be that you are connecting with in that moment. What new vista is being presented to you?

“Sometimes tears would come, and that was perplexing to me. I would go back through the passage I had just read, wondering what had made tears come.”

- Describe a time when scripture or poetry or music or a film scene has touched you in such a way that you felt a deep emotional response or have even been moved to tears. Be sure to describe why you think you may have been so deeply moved and what this moment felt like physically as well as emotionally.

Chapter 16

The New *Lectio*: Noticing and the Seven-Second Pause

“The practice of *Lectio* is a way to come to know the love of God *within us*, the Christ, the love of God in which we ‘live and move and have our being.’ In the solitude of *Lectio*, we become ‘connected to our own core,’ an act that can, for some, be truly revolutionary.”

- Why do you think *Lectio* and Centering Prayer practices could be considered “revolutionary”? How do you imagine that engaging in a new spiritual practice might be revolutionary to you? What would be your greatest hope for what the practice might bring into your life?

Author Kate Rademacher says: “I have begun avoiding the phrase ‘work-life balance,’ which implies that our work and our lives are separate and that daily life doesn’t require substantial amounts of work (which, of course, it does). Instead, I encourage us to reclaim our right to *work-rest* balance.”

- Describe how your “life” overlaps into your “work.” Describe how reclaiming your *work-rest* balance may change your daily life and way of being. Describe first steps that might help you make this change.

Chapter 17

The Centering Pause: Nourishing the Roots of Our Essence

“Keith Kristich, founder of the online contemplative community Closer Than Breath, opened my eyes to understand contemplative prayer as a practice that ‘nourishes the roots of our innermost self, our own essence, our divine indwelling.’ I had never thought of this before. I have found myself captivated by this truth that our divine indwelling, our innermost selves, is our ‘essence,’ and that resting in quiet Presence nourishes that essence in us.”

- Describe who you believe you are in your “essence.” Describe which practices, situations, and people might best nourish the roots of your essence. Describe what for you would be the purpose of nourishing the roots of your essence.

Rumi said: “When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving through you, a joy.”

- Describe a time you did something “from your soul.” Describe the effects of doing something from your soul, both in your inner and outer life.

Chapter 18

Centering Prayer: Divine Therapy for the Human Condition

Thomas Keating says the great question of the second half of the spiritual journey is ‘Who are you?’ I invite you to take a moment to observe what happens when you ask the question yourself: “Who am I? Am I who others want me to be? Am I who I think I *should* be? Am I who my career path says I am? Am I who my friends think I am? Which friends? Who am I in my essence? *Who* am I?”

- Walk through and journal the answers to each of these questions to see if you can discern a pattern or truth about who you think you are. Spend time considering how you have come to your conclusions about your self-identity.

“We also have a new awareness of the potential for us as human beings to evolve into higher levels of spiritual consciousness. Keating believes we are experiencing a spiritual evolution, ‘a prelude to a divine-human way of functioning in all the virtues of which humans are capable, but which we have not yet learned to put into practice.’”

- In what ways do you think we may be experiencing a spiritual evolution? Describe which situations in your life might be facilitating your own evolution. Be sure to describe people in your life who may be facilitating this evolution. What would it mean for you to be more fully human in living your life?

Epilogue

“A sacrament is an outer and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.”

- Can you name sacraments that might be sustaining you at this time in your life?

“Thomas Merton says, ‘There is a hidden wholeness in all things.’ Always remember there is a hidden wholeness in you.”

- Finally, describe what it has felt like when you connect with your innermost self, your divine indwelling. Where did you feel this in your body?
- Describe where, how, or with whom you have experienced a sense of your own “hidden wholeness.” Describe a time when you have experienced a sense that you are not alone, that you are connected to something that is at once greater than you and at the same time an integral part of you, always and forever.

Blessings, all, on what I hope may be a lifelong journey of practicing the pause!

Caroline Oakes