

# **“Walking Meditation” by Muriel Lipp**

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Muriel Lipp

## **Walking Meditation**

Our Scriptures today are about wholeness of body and wholeness of soul. We have just heard in Isaiah 43:20: “I will provide water in the wilderness and rivers in the barren desert.” In Psalm 41 we read, “I am upheld by you, God, because of my innocence; you keep me forever in your sight.” Moreover, in 2 Corinthians 1:22: “God has given the Spirit to dwell in our hearts.” For me, these beautiful expressions are not only about healing, but also about what it takes to receive healing, which is prayer.

When I first came to the [Church of the Saviour](#), one of the things that attracted me most was the disciplines. If we claimed to be disciples, I thought, we should live in a disciplined fashion, and here was a church that took this seriously. We should attend church regularly (not whenever we felt like it), pray daily, and, when we got a retreat center, go on silent retreat once a year, contribute proportionally, participate in missions to the poor, practice love in all our relationships, promote peace personally as well as globally. The disciplines are virtually the same ones we Seekers have now. We have added environmental responsibility, and changed the wording somewhat to be more specific about love.

Back then in the 1950s, we soon learned that very few of us were faithful in daily prayer, not to mention the other disciplines. We were hypocrites, saying one thing and doing another. The importance of prayer, and our failures in it, moved the church to establish written reports and spiritual direction in our [mission groups](#). We practice this in Seekers today. Most of us report on our Outward Journeys, our Inward Journeys (including prayer), and whatever seems spiritually significant. The Spiritual Director for the group reads these reports, comments on them, sometimes asks questions.

Prayer, for many of us, seems to be the big obstacle. How do you communicate daily with someone as big and mysterious as God Almighty? Well, I do believe that in the process, in itself, is the answer. Process is product. Some years ago, there was a children's book, written by Judy Blume, titled *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. I often feel like that innocent little girl. Nevertheless, asking that question is itself prayer.

Now I want to tell you how I pray. It is not the way I was taught in the early Church of the Saviour days, nor in my childhood, but it is a way I learned over the years from personal experience, books and what seems to work for me. God is such a mystery that I do not know if it is OK with God—but I am much enriched by my prayers. I ask myself “If I am enriched, can it be wrong?” If I feel God's presence, isn't that God? This is not to say that my sins are not scarlet, or at least pink, but I feel forgiven daily.

You have heard me talk endlessly about what that medieval book, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, has meant to me, and the modern books by Thomas Keating, which are based on *The Cloud*. In

modern language, which Keating has made famous, this is Centering Prayer, or the one-word prayer. Keating says you should sit or lie quietly, banish all thoughts from your mind, and let the one-word prayer consume you. Another word for this is Contemplation. It is accomplished in the heart, not the brain. As *The Cloud* says: not by study, but by grace. Keating recommends doing this twice a day. I do it only once a day.

I honor the way anyone prays. It is a very personal relationship between an individual and God. As our Corinthians scripture for today says, "God has given the Spirit to dwell in our hearts." However, my method is not the Father Keating way of sitting still. Like Frank Laubach, the each-one-teach-one literacy pioneer, I pray while walking. I learned about Laubach while tutoring. However, it was not his tutoring work that most attracted me. It was a book of his journaling, called *Letters by a Modern Mystic*, when he was working among the Moros in the Philippines.

"I have just returned from a walk alone," he says, "a walk so wonderful that I feel like reducing it to a universal rule, that all people ought to take a walk every evening all alone, . . . and that during this entire walk they ought to talk with God, . . . and let God do most of the talking."

Like Laubach, I pray while I walk, often by the river, since the Potomac is not far from us. This started after the death of our son. Consumed by grief, guilt and anger, I could not pray, so I took walks. Though I was angry with God, still I prayed "God, God, God" as I walked, just as the writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* suggested. Soon this became my regular method of prayer. Often I wept as I walked—and there was something about the water of my tears and the water of the

river that felt unifying. All around the river there was death and decay, as well as life and rebirth: a new universe. As I prayed for myself, I could not ignore those brothers and sisters around the world who suffered with me—whose moans and groans rose like incense on an altar.

Now, many years later, I am healed of my grief, but I still do my prayers walking. Having been in Yoga for almost 25 years, I coordinate my breath with my strides, keeping both lateral sides of my body even. I will exaggerate it to demonstrate, but when I am doing it, it looks like plain walking, and the praying is silent. (Demonstrate)

About distractions: You can imagine that my eyes and ears pick up much to distract me from God. Nevertheless, I name it all God, and there is much thank-you, thank-you in these walks. I walk for about a mile, sometimes in my neighborhood and often by the river. Do you ever think how fortunate we are to live by a river? As Isaiah says, “I will provide water in the wilderness and rivers in the barren desert. . . .” We are not in a wilderness or a barren desert, yet God has given us this beautiful river.

When it is raining or snowing, I sacrifice my walking prayers and try to find God at my desk by the window. Looking out, God is in the raindrops, the snowflakes, and, with my eyes closed, inside me, as I try to have a naked intent toward God. This is not as easy as when my body—breath, legs, arms, eyes, and ears—are in motion and the spirit within me is reaching out to God in the repetition of the sacred word. Though I use the word *God*, others use synonyms such as *love*, *light* or *rock*. God is whoever God is.

In the Gospels, Jesus gives us little direction in methods of prayer. He walked a lot, so I like to think he prayed while walking. He did give us a lot of substance in what we call the *Jesus Prayer*, which some call the *Lord's Prayer*.

When I am walking, I stop the Centering Prayer at half the distance and begin on intercession and petition, just as we have done as a church here today. It is important to pray for family, mission group, you my church and special persons that God has given us. I do prayers of thanksgiving as interruptions: "Thank you for that beautiful tree trunk . . . or for a warm house to go home to . . . for this loved one or that one." Thanksgiving is the easiest of all; confession is sometimes the hardest.

When Father Keating, of Centering Prayer, was in Washington recently, I was fortunate to hear him. (Incidentally, there is a story about this visit in the latest *Diaspora*.) I wanted to ask him what he thought of walking prayer, but there were many questions, and not much time. Moreover, I knew this was not his way. Certainly, it is not the way of many of you here today. Everyone has to pray his or her own way. I notice in the Dayspring agenda there is a Centering Prayer group that meets weekly. If you are interested, call Dayspring and get more information.

I am a person who loves nature, so I give thanks for every large tree trunk along my path—every flower, every buzzing thing. Others of you get the same thrill from city streets—the rich and the poor that crowd them. Tell me how you use your surroundings in your prayers. Alternatively, do you escape

them, go to the privacy of your rooms and seek God as Father Keating advises.

Several years ago, we had a class in the School of Christian Living on Centering Prayer. It was held in the World Room at 2025 Mass. Ave. We all sat on chairs, or lay on the floor, as Keating suggested we do. We sought God in the silence, meditating on a word. For homework in this class, it was suggested that we practice this at home. Then more recently, still at 2025, my mission group, Living Water, had a workshop on prayer. We could walk outside, or around the building, or sit still. However, a jackhammer was reverberating next door. Some of us incorporated the loud noise into our prayers; some tried to escape it by walking around the block; others found it very much of an interference. Prayer. How do we pray?

Those of you with very busy lives, how do you keep this discipline? It is easy for me to stand up here telling you how I enjoy my prayers when I am retired and have much time. If I do not pray in the morning, there is always the rest of the day. Nevertheless, I can look back at times of great busyness, when the importance of prayer and my guilt at not doing it haunted me.

There is a word in our Psalm 41 for today—*innocence*. Most of us try not to be innocent, or childlike. We in this room are educated and intelligent people. Moreover, I suspect most of us are proud of a level of sophistication. Yet I think it is wrong to ignore the child within. From that child comes art, beauty, truth, and the ability to stand naked before God, which is what prayer is.

As I get older, I will not be able to do walking prayer any more. People with disabilities cannot pray this way either. I would like to hear how some of you approach the Almighty God, that great mystery, who lives behind the Cloud of Unknowing and lives within each one of us, and everywhere. Some of you pray to Jesus, who revealed God to us and was willing to give His life so we might know God more personally. How do you pray to Jesus? Do you picture Him? When I pray to God, there is no way I can picture God. Jesus describes God as a parent, a father. Doesn't that mean that God is intimate, warm, caring?

When Father Keating was here in Washington, he used the word *intend* often, just as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* did many centuries before. Intend, intend, intend. When I first read *The Cloud*, I thought it was strange how often this word was used. The dictionary definition is "to stretch out for, to aim at." "Intend God altogether." I had been taught, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." That is not so, according to *The Cloud*, and later Father Keating.

Therefore, it is not surprising that this word should find its way into one of my poems several years ago. Entitled "A Seed Swelling," it is dedicated to the anonymous author of *The Cloud*:

A medieval voice cries:

Intend God altogether.

I try, try,  
but what is intent?

Fruit of the heart,  
a seed swelling to burst.  
The road to heaven is  
paved with good intention.

What is God?  
Joy, Peace, Light?

I do not know. God may be  
loved, but not thought of.  
See, the dry earth thirsts.  
So yearn for God.

What is the source  
of such yearning?

God intends you altogether.  
God intends you altogether.



