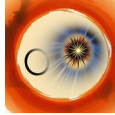


Series: From Ego to...?



Episode: 3.

Preparing for Healing and Transformation

Tony Macelli

Recognising Our Constructed Identity:

How Seeing the Ego Transforms Spiritual Life

Let's be honest: most of us spend a good chunk of our lives wearing masks, playing roles, and constructing a "me" that (we hope) will work in the world. It's not something we do out of malice or stupidity; it's just the natural reflex of the ego - the bundle of habits, defences, and stories we've pieced together since childhood to help us fit in, stand out, or just get by. Think of the ego as your best attempt at a survival suit: functional, maybe a bit stiff, and never quite your real skin.

Contemplative teachers - folks like Richard Rohr (b. 1943), the Franciscan priest and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, Thomas Merton (1915–1968), the Trappist monk, poet, and author on contemplation and justice, Henri Nouwen (1932–1996), the Dutch Catholic priest and spiritual writer, and the medieval Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), the Ger-

IN THIS SERIES...

In Episode 1 "*What is the Ego?*" we saw how the false self is a survival structure—formed through adaptation and fear—that can obscure our true nature in God.

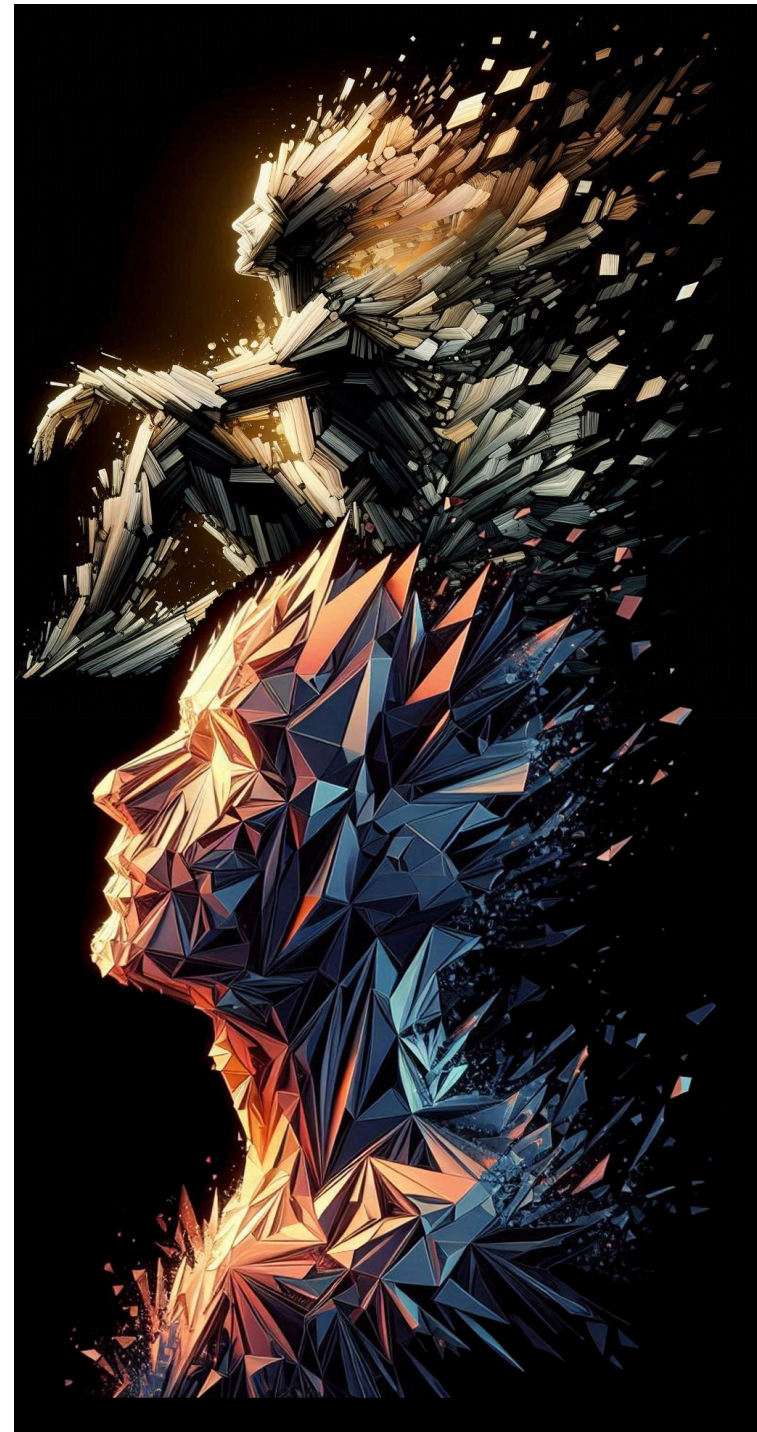
In Episode 2 "*Ego and Transformation*" we saw how contemplative teachers, through their own lived experience, guide us in loosening the ego's grip and cooperating with grace in times of disruption and change.

Today in Episode 3 we see how the healing of the ego takes root through daily practices of surrender and silence, making space for inner clarity, emotional release, and a more spacious identity to emerge.

man Dominican mystic and theologian, - have all taken turns poking at this costume. Rohr calls it our "passing, egoic identity" - manufactured, yes, but not our truest home. Nouwen points out that the "false self" is basically cobbled together by social pressures and anxieties. Wearing this suit gets tiring, especially as we start to wonder if it's actually us inside.

Here's where the first nudge of transformation comes in: when you realize most of what you automatically call "me" is simply inherited, constructed, and oh-so-conditioned. In that moment - a little space opens up. You meet your habitual patterns with a bit more truth, maybe even a flash of compassion. The hold loosens.

But the ego is a clever shape-shifter. Sometimes, it shows up as a shield - protecting



us from pain or rejection (or so it promises). At other times, it's more of a prison, keeping us circling around the same old insecurities, fears, and imagined separations. Meister Eckhart doesn't mince words: the ego is "the illusion of self that stands apart from the divine reality." That sense of being cut off - that's the real barrier to spiritual union and joy.

So what, then? Are we supposed to wage war on the ego? Not exactly. The contemplative path isn't about polishing up your ego or stuffing it into a corner; it's about letting it relax. Instead of grading ourselves on how "improved" we've become, we learn (slowly, painfully, with some relapses) to surrender our illusions. The goal isn't relentless self-improvement, but gentle

self-acceptance and trust. Thomas Keating (1923–2018), the Trappist monk and founder of Centering Prayer, summed it up: "The chief act of the will is not effort but consent." That means letting go when you'd rather grip tight - and trusting that grace can do what effort never could.

If you want to put this into practice, you needn't invent anything fancy. Centering Prayer, times of silence, the Welcoming Prayer - all these are tools for simply noticing when the ego's "three addictions" (security, esteem, control) pop up and graciously letting them go. Instead of a demolition job or guilt trip, it's more like regularly opening a window and letting in some fresh air. Gradually, the whole room changes. The energy we spent propping up our false self is freed for



The Ego as a Survival Suit

Gently Letting Go

Practices of Consent

love, compassion, and new connection. Spiritual life shifts: less a battlefield with yourself, more a kind of ongoing pilgrimage into freedom.

And here's a crucial point: no wise teacher sets out to annihilate the ego. There's no virtue in demonizing the poor thing. Keating notes that our ordinary, egoic self can "be transformed into wakefulness - into compassion and gentleness." It's not about spiritual lobotomy, but about seeing through the illusions and allowing even our quirks to be gradually suffused and redirected by grace. Merton echoes: all of ourselves, even the most human parts, can be "redeemed and transformed as God's presence grows within."

So, what's the upshot? Understanding the

ego is a bit like discovering you've been seeing your life through frosted glass. With patience, humility, and the help of practice, that glass slowly clears. The spiritual journey stops being about fixing or conquering ourselves and becomes a daily invitation - to notice, to loosen, to consent to being made new. That's where transformation takes root: in the paradox of surrender, self-honesty, and love.

Contemporary Voices

Contemporary Contemplative Christian Voices on the Healing and Transformation of the Self

Let's settle in for a moment with the voices of some spiritual companions - people who have walked the inner terrain, tripped on the same ego snares, and

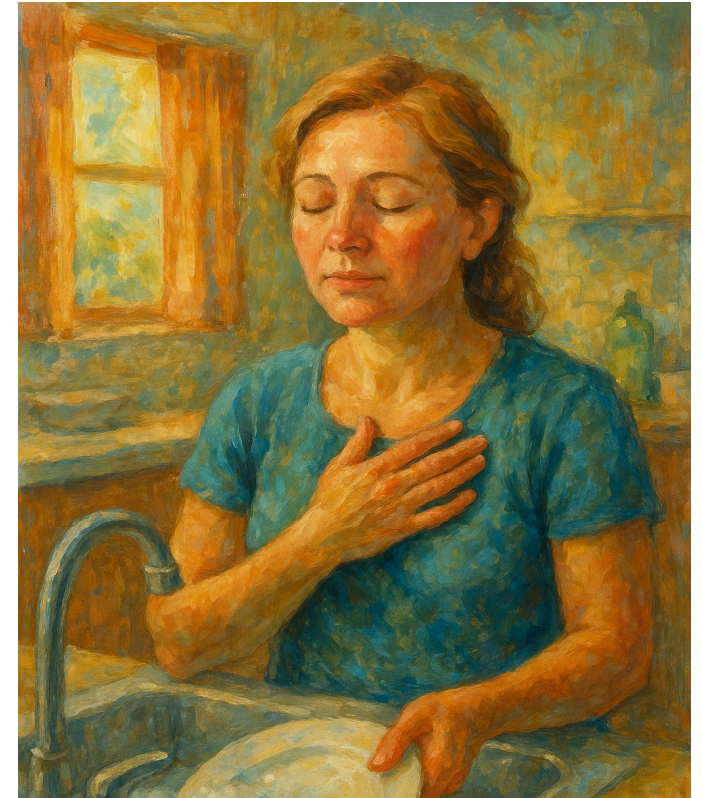


learned to listen for the deeper music of the soul.

Gerald May (1940–2005), the psychiatrist and spiritual writer known for his work on surrender and addiction, for one, isn't much for heroics. He offers a welcome sigh of relief: healing the false self doesn't begin with trying harder, tightening your grip, or bossing your soul into shape. Instead, he says, it's about willingness - a steady, opening act of letting yourself be helped. "The process of surrender is not passive; it is an active yielding... a willingness to allow God's grace to do for us what we cannot do alone." You don't engineer grace, you yield to it.

What looks, at first, like letting go of control turns out to be the way in - an act of spiritual consent that is gentle but mighty. Thomas Keating sums it up beautifully: "the chief act of the will is consent." May echoes, "The freedom to love emerges only when we stop trying to make ourselves good and instead yield to the goodness that is already within us." Healing, for May, unfolds as a gentle, trusting cooperation with what is already being offered rather than an achievement. (May, 1988)

Martin Laird, the Augustinian scholar and spiritual teacher of silence, invites us into the hush beneath the surface. For him, healing isn't a medal for personal effort. It arises, almost quietly, in the open space of interior silence. The ego's anxious projects dissolve not because we outsmart them, but because we finally rest our case



and wait. "When we notice that we have been taken away by thought, the work is simply to come back - again and again - to the silence where God dwells." Laird gets at that paradox: transformation isn't manufactured - it comes as gift, out of our presence, not our performance. He writes like a bell softly struck in a quiet chapel, The real therapy for egoic fragmentation is this faithful, loving return to silence and interior noticing, treating distraction not as failure but as the friendly opportunity to return. (Laird, 2006)

Cynthia Bourgeault, the Episcopal priest and mystic known for her integration of kenosis

and Centering Prayer, takes a firm but compassionate look at all our grasping and fearing. The ego, she observes, is a creature of clutch and recoil - forever tensing and bracing, as if letting go would be the end. She invites us into "kenosis" - that spacious, practical discipline of releasing, again and again. It's not one grand gesture, but a rewiring of the heart, a muscle built through daily practice. "

Centering Prayer," she says, "is like aerobic training in kenosis. You build the letting-go muscle." She also reminds, "You do not have to do anything except to let go of your resistance to what is present, and trust the deeper current of love at work." Letting go isn't resignation but a lively, moment-to-moment collaboration with grace. With regular exercise, even our resistance becomes a teacher and healing becomes a habit. (Bourgeault, 2004)

Ruth Burrows (b. 1923), the Carmelite nun and spiritual writer also known as Sister Rachel, takes it even further. She writes like a desert mother: crisp, practical, a little unsparring. Healing doesn't come from spiritual ambition or tall piles of good intentions. It comes, she insists, from passive availability: not what we do, but what God finds it possible to do in us, if only we stop getting in the way.

"Faith is spiritual helplessness, consent to be little, unimportant, and poor before God - accepting, trusting, and waiting." The ego isn't so much conquered as sidestepped. Burrows reminds us, "What matters is not what we do, but what God is able to do in us - if only we would allow him." It's about deep receptivity and surrendering ego-strength, not striving for



self-perfection. (Burrows, 1976)

Tilden Edwards, the Episcopal priest and founder of the Shalem Institute, gives us permission to stop performing and simply become spacious - inside and out. Healing, for him, is found not on the stage of achievement but within the quieted, open heart. By letting go of the pressing need to be in control, special, or victorious, we clear a space in which God's silent, transforming work can unfold. "

Simply noticing how we are - without judgment - lets God's healing light enter the shadowed places of the self." "Letting go of our felt need to achieve, to be in control or special, opens space in us for God's silent work of transformation." His approach is about honest presence, not inner manipulation, and affirming that grace does the real work. (Edwards, 1987)

James Finley, the clinical psychologist and student of Thomas Merton, known for his gentle articulation of contemplative healing, brings lived tenderness. He invites us to see the false self not just as fallen, but as wounded - sometimes deeply. Healing here is not a fix-it job, but an offering: we bring our shattered spots into the luminous presence of divine love, and trust the outcome to mercy, not management.

"We are healed to the extent that we give ourselves over to the healing presence that is already within us." The false self, Finley says, is the illusion of a "separate self," and healing begins as that illusion unravels in the patient company of love. This is spirituality with the rough edges left in, where the balm is presence and the answer is never force. (Finley, 1978)

If you zoom out to the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC), you'll find the same steady theme, voiced variously by James Finley, Susan Rush, a contemplative teacher and contributor to the CAC community, and Richard Rohr. Susan Rush calls Centering Prayer a "prayer of consent" - transformation as ongoing partnership, not powerplay. Rohr frames it all as "Divine Therapy": when we pause, ask for help, and invite grace right into the places we're most stuck, something profound shifts. The shift - from being pushed around by anxiety and fear to being drawn by the inner current of God's presence - doesn't happen overnight, but each consistent practice realigns us, drawing us ever more gently toward a life lived from trust.

Travel, next, to the World Community

for Christian Meditation (WCCM), and you'll hear the same melody in another key. There, spiritual healing is about patience, self-giving, and the slow realization that our ego's meanings are never enough. Their communities teach that persistent meditation gradually un.masks our false structures and nurtures a tentative, resilient trust - not in our performance, but in grace itself. Whether you're a seasoned meditator or brand new, they'll tell you: attentive stillness softens self-consciousness, quiets image-making, and coaxes out the sound of your true name that's been hidden under all that noise.

At the Shalem Institute, the wounded heart is received with reverence. For Shalem, the problem isn't just ego, but the illusion of separation - the inner myth that

we are cut off from God, others, even ourselves. Their answer is practice, patience, and openness: a "medicine of grace" that seeps in gradually, gently healing as the heart opens to unitive presence. Here, healing isn't just a mind-game - it's embodied. The wisdom is simple: include your breath, your feet on the floor, your very body in prayer. Even ten minutes a day, done honestly, can untie old knots and make room for new beginnings.

All these teachers and communities, in their own accents, point in the same direction: healing the false self isn't about striving, engineering, or heroic repair. It's an invitation to loosen, allow, receive, and return - to let the simplicity of trust, presence, and consent do the deep, mysterious work that only grace can complete.

Eastern Christian Wisdom on Healing the False Self

Let's wander for a while through the gentle landscape of Eastern Christian wisdom - a path quietly lit by the lives and words of Hesychast teachers, who knew a thing or two about healing the false self without fanfare or fanaticism.

Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894), the Russian Orthodox bishop and Hesychast spiritual guide, stands out as a voice both compassionate and practical. He sees the false self thriving on distraction and inner scattering. For Theophan, healing begins with the choice to descend into the heart, showing up with quiet, attentive prayerfulness. He writes:

"To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing within you."





In practice, Theophan's way is refreshingly simple. Set aside a little space for quiet. Notice the urge to chase after every thought, but resist giving in. Let the Jesus Prayer - "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" - become a soft thread leading you inward, not as a mechanical chant but as a living rhythm. Over time, your attention settles; your heart grows still - not through force, but through gentle anchoring.

What's striking is how Theophan sidesteps heroics. He never asks for dramatic renunciation or spiritual theatrics - just honest effort, frequent short prayers, silence, and the tender work of returning. His is a path of spiritual concentration, accessible and wholly human. Grace, not self-mastery, does the deepest work. (Theophan the Recluse, 1995)

St. Hesychios the Priest (5th–6th century), a Byzantine monk and master of watchfulness, the Priest brings a bracing wisdom: healing is born of *nepsis* - spiritual watchfulness. For Hesychios, the heart needs gentle guarding, a kind of inner sentry duty to catch self-deceiving impulses at their source. He explains:

"Watchfulness is a continual fixing and halting of thought at the entrance to the heart." This isn't a tense alertness but a steady, affectionate noticing - especially of thoughts coloured by desire, fear, or judgment. Whenever you catch yourself swept up, you pause, recollect, bring everything back to God's quiet presence within.

Hesychios' teaching is experiential, not just theoretical. "Guarding the heart" becomes the soil for the undivided soul. Healing arises not from brute force but from allowing grace to work through silent, attentive welcome. His approach stands as a gentle precursor to divine indwelling: it's less about building barricades and more about soft readiness for God. (Hesychios the Priest, 1983)

St. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), the Orthodox theologian of noetic prayer and divine light, moves the conversation into the light - literally. For him, the false self isn't just a tangle of bad habits; it's blindness to the divine light already shining within. Healing is about bringing the soul, through prayer, into communion with that uncreated light. He writes with conviction:

"The light of the soul is noetic prayer...

Through it, the passions are extinguished and the mind is purified."

Noetic prayer in the Orthodox tradition is the *prayer of the mind in the heart* — a deep, interior prayer in which the mind becomes still, descends into the heart, and attends to God in continuous awareness. For Gregory, it opens the soul to the uncreated divine light that heals and purifies.

Palamas urges a gradual, trusting path. Enter silence; let prayer fall below the level of words, images, even desires. The goal isn't to achieve a mystical experience for its own sake, but to become, little by little, transparent to God's presence.

This is healing by shining, not striving - a surrender that allows the holy to do its work without our controlling it. Palamas unites Dionysian darkness with practical stillness, showing that real illumination happens in the quiet space where effort gives way to trust.

You don't need visions or fireworks - just the willingness to return to silence, let go, and allow grace to do the illuminating. (Gregory Palamas, 1983) In the Hesychast tradition, all true ego healing is the fruit of grace. Whether through anchoring attention in the heart, practicing daily watchfulness, or opening silently to divine light, each of these teachers points us back not to heroic effort but to accessible steps and humble trust. Transformation is always invitation, never conquest.

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Common Challenges

Common Challenges Faced During Ego Surrender in Meditation and Prayer

Settling into prayer or meditation with the hope of surrender is no simple passage. Christian contemplative guides like Thomas Keating, Richard Rohr, and Henri Nouwen remind us that ego does not dissolve quietly or quickly; its patterns are both ancient and persistent, playing out each time we sit in stillness. Yet, it is precisely in naming and meeting these difficulties with a spirit of gentleness that the actual work - this mysterious “consent to grace” - is allowed to unfold.

1. Inner Resistance and Control Reflex

The ego, so expertly trained for self-preservation, readily stirs at the first living orientation of letting go. Quiet times of prayer or meditation swiftly reveal our default reflex: trying to get it right, planning, fixing, subtly steering the experience from behind the scenes. Keating calls this the uprising of our “emotional programs for happiness” - security, esteem, and control - surfacing even in silence, tugging us away from trust and back to striving. Such moments can leave us frustrated or mechanical, feeling as if nothing ‘spiritual’ is happening. But here, as ever, the path is to simply notice this struggle, allow it, and gently return again.

2. Flood of Thoughts and Feelings

Many expect peace in stillness, but just



as often, old memories, judgments, angers, or waves of anxiety surge into awareness. Instead of peace, we find ourselves bombarded by memory loops, harsh self-talk, anxiety, or old emotional pain. Beginners especially may be tempted to see this as failure, only tightening their grip to suppress what needs to emerge. Keating’s wisdom offers a reframe: what rises is not a sign of doing it wrong, but “divine therapy” in motion - the necessary surfacing of what is ready to be healed. The invitation is not expulsion, but gentle permission, turning distractions into opportunities for deeper yielding. If we can stay, even if we’re trembling, the discomfort becomes strangely luminous.

3. Vulnerability and Discomfort

The journey of surrender is anything but a

romantic drift; it exposes us, and stirs precisely those parts we have defended or hidden. True surrender means giving up image management. In opening ourselves to prayer’s deeper currents, shame or grief may arise, or perhaps the naked fear of losing control. Ruth Burrows names this as “spiritual helplessness” - an almost tender poverty before God. Here, it is no shame to feel raw or small; the greater risk, if any, lies in retreating into old behaviours or drifting back into familiar self-consolations. Yet with patience, even “spiritual helplessness” becomes fertile soil.

4. Impatience and Expectation

The ego loves results and proof - spiritual experiences, insights, a dramatic sense of progress. But when stillness yields neither firework nor quick relief, disappointment and impatience are near at hand. Rohr reminds us that “we do not think ourselves into new ways of living; we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.” Transformation is slow, more like dawn than lightning, and the call is to trust the process over the product. The discipline is to remain, to consent, and to resist the shortcut of performance.

5. Subtle Pride or Spiritual Ambition

Ironically, even surrender is not immune to the ego’s ambitions! We may begin to take pride in our supposed progress or judge ourselves - or others - by a hidden scale of spiritual achievement. Keating quietly warns against turning surrender itself into another “project” of the false self. Here, again, humility is the safeguard: noticing the subtlest forms of ego “success” and gently laying them down. This is humility - not as self-deprecation, but as radical honesty before God.

6. Misunderstanding Surrender as Passivity

For some, surrender is misunderstood as resignation - a kind of yielding that abdicates responsibility or drifts into apathy. Yet true surrender, in prayer as in life, is never passive. It is an active trust, a consenting to God's work without abandoning our participation. The inner living orientation required is not the absence of effort, but the courage to trust grace over striving.

And so, amid all these human tangles, the contemplative tradition keeps offering its simple encouragements:

Treat distractions and resistance not as enemies, but as opportunities for gentle return. Welcome what arises with hospitality, allowing even discomfort, rather than battling or banishing it. Practice consent in small, regular steps - a slow work of grace, not an act of heroism. Seek support, as Keating and Rohr advise; soulful companions, teachers, and gentle spiritual directors can steady our willingness to remain.

In the end, the "difficulties" themselves become, strangely, the very ground of transformation. Not defects, but invitations. Each is a place to practice humility, consent, and ongoing trust. As Nouwen, Keating, Rohr, and Burrows all echo, the movement of surrender spirals downward and inward, unveiling not a self we must engineer, but the goodness already present. The only work

Common Challenges Faced During Ego Surrender in Meditation and Prayer - Summary Table

Challenge	Guidance from Contemplatives
Resistance/control reflex	Normalize it - gently return, without force
Flood of distractions/emotions	Welcome, notice, let go - "divine therapy" in action
Vulnerability/discomfort	Consent to "spiritual helplessness;" be patient
Impatience/expectation	Trust gradual process - "live into" new ways, not force
Spiritual pride/ambition	Notice the ego's subtleties - return to humility
Passivity or avoidance	Surrender is active trust, not escape or apathy

required - day after day, breath after breath - is our gentle yes.

In summary, ego surrender in meditation and prayer is a path marked by resistance, distraction, vulnerability, and slow progress! Contemplative wisdom sees these not as defects, but as integral to the healing journey. Obstacles themselves become occasions for renewed consent, trust, and discovery of the true self. The invitation, echoed by Keating, Rohr, Nouwen, Burrows and others, is to meet each challenge with patience, humility, and faith in the transforming work of grace.

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“If one goes to one’s own heart,
one will find oneself in the heart
of everyone else, and everyone
else, as well as oneself, in the
heart of Ultimate Mystery.”

— Thomas Keating,
Contemplative Outreach newsletter,
June 2010