

Speaker 1 ([00:00:10](#)):

Hello, this is Ron Barnett, the host of All Things Contemplative, the podcast that explores all the various ways that we can awaken to the contemplative dimension of life we have today. Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler as our guest, and we'll turn to Gail in a moment. Before we do, I do want to invite the listeners that if you have a speaker, a guest, or a topic that you would like the podcast to include in half, please do contact me. My contact information is on the podcast website and also on the podcast contemplative blog. So please do be in touch with that. Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler, I could think of no one better to invite on the podcast today to talk about organization or organism, the story of contemplative outreach. Why would I think that? Well, Gail was a founding member of contemplative outreach. She also has been, or was, I should say, she retired a couple years ago. She has also been its president for over 30 years. So I could think of no one who could tell us the story better than Gail. And also to answer the intriguing question, is it an organization or an organism? So Gail will tell us a little bit about herself as we go along. And with that, I want to turn things over to Gail. Gail, welcome.

Speaker 2 ([00:02:01](#)):

So thank you, Ron. Thank you for inviting me and to all things contemplative. I love that title. And well, the question, is it an organization or an organism is an interesting one. And I think we've debated that over the years. Contemplative outreach I think was, I guess the official founding, so to speak, of contemplative outreach could be when we incorporated, and that was an incorporation in a not-for-profit organization. So there's the word organization. Up until that point, we were a loosely gathered group of contemplatives, not even recognizing we were contemplatives, actually, but we sort of crystallized a little group around Father Thomas Keating, who was a Trappist monk in the monastery for many, many years. And he was very interested in sharing contemplation or contemplative prayer, contemplative practice you could even call it, with laypeople. And he found that out through some of his exploration with his fellow monks. And they developed a little prayer practice, a meditation practice, and they began to talk about it and share it with people who went to St. Joseph's Abbey on retreat, which is located in Spencer, Massachusetts. And they found that the people that came, priests, nuns, lay people, almost all Catholics at the time of that group, the people that were most interested in contemplative practice were the lay people,

Speaker 1 ([00:04:04](#)):

People like you and me.

Speaker 2 ([00:04:06](#)):

People like you and me, Ron. Yes. And what they were looking for was silence. The clergy and the nuns, the religious that went there for retreat, already had some kind of prayer life, spiritual life that included bits of silence or at least quiet time and what they called meditation, which was usually meditation on a particular thing. And so they didn't really feel called to this type, and they weren't hungry for it, and they weren't that interested. They felt they already had a spiritual life. So it surprised the monks. It surprised Father Thomas. It surprised William Menninger and Basil Pennington, who were the two monks that he primarily worked with back in the early days in the seventies. There was also a fellow that was involved in the insight meditation, which is an eastern method of meditation. But he was also interested in Christian contemplative practice, and he had befriended Father Thomas, a young man, and he felt that there were contemplative lay people, and he was kind of pushed him for it though, Thomas, father Thomas at the beginning, he didn't really think that was the case. Who would be, people are busy in their lives who would be interested in prayer or side things.

Speaker 1 ([00:05:43](#)):

This was like in what, the early eighties?

Speaker 2 ([00:05:46](#)):

No, I think this was more like 86, 87, I mean 76, 77 in the end of the seventies. So there were little groups that were starting to gather around this kind of idea. During the course of this time, this man, his name is Ed Bednar, wrote a proposal to introduce contemplative practice to people in parishes in New York City. And he wanted to get a foundation in New York to support this idea. Father Thomas didn't think it was going to go anywhere, so they kept the proposal for a while. And then when the eighties came around and we started to think about how we could reach out to other contemplatives, we started out in a retreat setting back in 83 in Lama, in the Lama Foundation in Taos, New Mexico. And it was a group of people gathered for 14 days of silence to share the silence and practice and listen to the conceptual background of contemplative practice in the Christian tradition that Father Thomas was sharing with everyone.

([00:07:17](#)):

So it was a long retreat, and it was very interesting. But at the end of the retreat, there were a few people there who felt like, gee, this would be great if other people who knew about it. And there was one woman there, Mary Mazowski who had already started a contemplative prayer group in Long Island, and there were other people there who had little friends that they did practice with and that kind of thing. I was among that group. And so when we got back, when we left the retreat and went home, the idea at the end of the retreat was, why don't we all pray about this and think about how God is calling us to carry this forth? Or I guess if is probably the better word, if God was calling it for, so Thomas said when he comes to New York, because he had a sister and brother in New York, and occasionally he would come to New York, he said, when he came to New York, we should get together and talk about these things.

([00:08:18](#)):

And he was very interested in this prayer group that Mary had led on contemplative practice. So he came, and when he got there, we formed this little group. This proposal that Ed had written all of a sudden became something that was going to be useful. And Thomas said, well, maybe we should see if we could get a little money so that we could start something here and we'll see where it goes. And it was very, very casual. So I would say it was an organism at that time. There was this organic flow, there was no one pushing anything. There wasn't any kind of structure to it, except it was this little group that would gather when Thomas came to New York and we explored.

Speaker 1 ([00:09:16](#)):

It sounds like there was no hierarchy.

Speaker 2 ([00:09:18](#)):

No, no, not at all. And we were all interested in what Mary was doing, and he was very interested. Thomas Keating was very interested in seeing whether or not we would be able to share it with other people in our own little areas. Now, I was from New Jersey and Father Carl Arico is from New Jersey, so he thought Father Carl and I could maybe talk to some people that we knew. And then Mary was from Long Island, and then there were a couple of people from Manhattan, and he said, well, maybe we could talk about this thing in somebody's church or parish or whatever. So sure enough, he got this proposal, he sort of dusted it off, and Thomas Keating is surprisingly resourceful. I mean, people thought he was pretty, he was a very brilliant man, very formal in a lot of ways, but very resourceful.

[\(00:10:16\)](#):

And he didn't forget too quickly things that he had heard about. So he knew about this thing, and sure enough, we took it to a foundation in New York and they wanted to support it, and they wanted it to be in Manhattan, and they wanted us to start out in St. Ignatius Church on Park Avenue and 84th Street. So there were people there that we knew who had been practicing because they had gone to retreats and so on. And Thomas gave the first introductory workshop on centering prayer, contemplative prayer at St. Ignatius in, I think it was 84 or 85, no, maybe it was 85. And we all went, and we were very excited about the possibilities that it opened, and we were very excited that so many other people came and they were looking for something deeper. They were looking for more than they were getting in their parish in the form of practice in prayer.

[\(00:11:23\)](#):

They got the worship, they got the services, but they didn't have a real kind of, they didn't feel included in a deep commitment to practice in prayer. So they took to it very quickly. And from there, it went from parish to parish to parish. And what happened then was that Thomas Keating would come from Colorado where he was living at the time, and when he would come, we would set up workshops. So we'd have one in New Jersey, we'd have one in Long Island, we'd have one in here, and we'd invite people in their parishes. And that went on for two or three years. And we used this money that was donated by a foundation to support these efforts. So I would say though, there was a loose structure, but it was not an organization at the time, and it was fruitful. It was people gathered to come together for prayer, and it was small and it was intimate, and people had access to calling us and asking questions or inviting us to their parachute.

[\(00:12:41\)](#):

So there was a lot of personal one-on-one relationships at the time. So then it turned into about, by the time 86 rolled around, there were over, I think there were 500 or 800 people now, and they were very interested, but it started to get bigger and bigger and less harder to manage really, although it was still centered in Manhattan. And so that's when some of the people that were gathered felt as though maybe we should form a, not-for-profit and approach the Catholic Archdiocese of New York to see if we could get in the Catholic directory in order to allow us to do some fundraising because we saw that we needed money and we had no way to get money. And we based on people gave little donations at the workshops and so on and that kind of thing. So then you would say, okay, so here is this organic assembly, let's say, of people, and there's this not-for-profit organization because it was essential to acquiring the things we wanted to acquire as we grew, and what our mission or our intention or our wish was to spread contemplative practice in the form of centering prayer to as many people worldwide as possible.

[\(00:14:27\)](#):

We just felt like, okay, now we can do this. We can continue to raise some money and do some things. So it is kind of like we were almost pushed into the back door for very practical reasons to become an organization.

Speaker 1 [\(00:14:46\)](#):

So as I understand it, it began pretty much on a very personal level, a lot of face-to-face contact.

Speaker 2 [\(00:14:55\)](#):

Oh, yes.

Speaker 1 ([00:14:57](#)):

In the early eighties. And then I think it was 1986 that the 5 0 1 3 C was formed. Is this a Catholic organization, Gail? Well, from what you're saying it is.

Speaker 2 ([00:15:11](#)):

Well, from what I'm saying, the origin was Catholic.

([00:15:15](#)):

In our first vision statement, it was Catholic in origin and ecumenical in scope by virtue of the fact that we were listed in the Catholic directory, the Roman Catholic directory, there is no way in hell you could deny that, but we did not limit ourselves to Catholic activities. So we would go where we were invited, we never proselytized. We went door to door saying, do we have a prayer for you? We only went to parishes and places and churches, or even halls where people gathered to hear about this. We didn't differentiate. We never took information. We never gathered data, so to speak. What's your name, your address, and what affiliation are you? We never did any of that. We just welcomed everyone. So it was ecumenical and scope because silence is not dogmatic. There's no real talk there, and you don't have to buy into a particular religion, so to speak, in order to understand the depth of silence in the spirit that dwells within.

([00:16:39](#)):

And so that's how we started over the years, that little phrase, Catholic and origin and ecumenical and scope sort of dropped away. But nonetheless, I don't know. I believe to this day, as far as I know, there are still a listing in the Catholic directory. There's also a listing in the Episcopal directory, and I think there could be other listings in other directories for other religions if they have them. But again, that listing initially was fundamental to fundraising and to getting away. In other words, there's a checkbox on some of these foundations, and the only way you can get money from them is if you're in the Catholic directory and you have to provide the page.

Speaker 1 ([00:17:35](#)):

It seems like a really unique characteristic of an organization when you say that it didn't operate like a typical organization to recruit people to do marketing, to do demographic analysis. It was very much from what you described. One of you did what you did based on being invited. And I would assume there was some underlying felt sense that this centering prayer was something that was desirable or maybe it wasn't even articulated by people what they needed, but there was an attraction to what this organization was talking about.

Speaker 2 ([00:18:28](#)):

And what it was. Basically, we recognized the attraction in ourselves and that we had been looking for something like this for a very long time. So there were so many testimonies, let's say, of people who had kind of stumbled upon this and said, where has this been all my life? I can recall going to probably in the very early seventies, I was a mother of three young children, probably a newborn, almost maybe six months old or something like that, and two little toddler, two little ones. And I just had this burning desire to be alone and to be quiet. Now you might say, I wanted to escape the kids, but I just felt a call to not talking and just waiting and listening. And I remembered sharing that with my mother, and my mother said, why don't you go to the beach for a weekend by yourself and just see what happens? And I found a very, very strong attraction to it.

([00:19:42](#)):

And I heard this story from others, and I don't think I did at the beginning. I don't even remember attaching it to some sort of a faith experience as much as a cult to silence. And then I learned all the trappings around it over the years, and I'm still learning. We ran into a lot of people who had that same experience, and many people had gone to the east to find meditation because they didn't find it in their own churches or their own life in any way in their own life. So they found it there because it was popular and it was popularized by the TM movement. And so they tried it, they went there and they were attracted to the silence.

Speaker 1 ([00:20:36](#)):

Right, right, right. That's how the organization, the organism grew.

Speaker 2 ([00:20:41](#)):

Right?

Speaker 1 ([00:20:41](#)):

By virtue of this inner attraction that people were experiencing, they were looking for something that even they may not have been able to have articulated what it was exactly, but there was a draw, a calling. Some people, as I understand it, were very involved in Eastern religious practices meditation. We've talked a little bit about the organization, how it began, Thomas Keating's involvement with it. Maybe we should spend a couple minutes talking about this, practice, this consider, what is it, what's its purpose? Is it prayer as we normally understand prayer or is it different? Is it meditation or not? So I'll just turn it over to you on this.

Speaker 2 ([00:21:40](#)):

Well, what's centering prayer is a way of entering into silence. I would say at the broadest possible explanation, it's a means for entering into silence. Now, many of the people, especially in parishes and things like that, that came to these original workshop already knew prayer, and they knew how to pray, and they knew different things, but they still felt they wanted to go deeper or they wanted to have some periods of silence, and no one knew what to do about that or how to get there. And so this is a little how to method. It has four simple guidelines, and it really keeps you still, and it keeps you quiet, and it just opens your heart to allow the spirit of God just sort of bubble up from within any sensation or feelings or knowing, but it's just being present to what is.

Speaker 1 ([00:22:50](#)):

And Gail, what are those four steps or guidelines? Could you just briefly say what they are?

Speaker 2 ([00:22:56](#)):

Sure. There's what we call a sacred word. So in the beginning, you take the time to choose a sacred word, and it's a very simple one syllable or two syllable word. And you just in the beginning, you just choose that. And then the next guideline is whenever you are aware of thinking about something or wishing for something, you introduce this word and the word is a symbol of your consent to say yes to a deeper relationship with God. And while you're in centering prayer, the third guideline applies, which is every time this happens, every time you begin to think about something or look for something or crave something, you return to the sacred words. So it's a little, I think of the sacred word as a little mechanism that detaches you from the flow of thoughts that are running by.

Speaker 1 ([00:24:14](#)):

I see. Do you concentrate on the word?

Speaker 2 ([00:24:17](#)):

No. You only take up the word when you recognize that you're sitting there thinking about something. And so it takes quite, it's a practice because of course you have to do it over and over and over again. But at first you don't even know that you're thinking. You're so used to having chains of thoughts that go through your mind that you don't even recognize when or when not to use the word. So you only take up the word when you begin to have what I call and what Thomas ton call a interior dialogue. When you begin to talk to yourself and develop a story,

([00:25:04](#)):

And suddenly you realize that's what you're sitting there doing, you return to your sacred word and you just place it there. And what does that say? It says, here I am. Here I am, Lord, my intention is to be in a deeper relationship. And yes, I consent to that without saying all that. That's what your little word symbolizes. And then at the end of the prayer, you just say, you just sort of say a prayer of gratitude. You just bow your head and thank you for this time. Whatever you want to do. At the end of the prayer, often some people say the Lord's prayer, some people say other prayers. Some people just wait two or three moments and just sit there. And then other people, everybody has their own way of ending it. But it has this, it is a methodology. It's something that you, let's say it's a methodology that's a discipline to help you sit for 20 minutes twice a day.

([00:26:17](#)):

So in other words, you engage in this practice so that you can actually stay seated for 20 minutes, because if you didn't have something like returning to the sacred word, chances are you would get up after two minutes of sitting down. I mean, people are so used to moving around, they can't just sit still for 20 minutes. So it stills the mind. It stills, first of all, I think it from the outside in, I think what it does is it stills the body and you relax into the body, and then you subtly and slowly starts to still the voices within. And then you're more open to receive this gift of contemplation or the gift of contemplative prayer, which is really silence.

Speaker 1 ([00:27:14](#)):

Yeah, interesting. So the word is your own private word is your symbol for your intention to consent.

Speaker 2 ([00:27:27](#)):

Yes.

Speaker 1 ([00:27:27](#)):

Is that right to God,

Speaker 2 ([00:27:32](#)):

The God of your understanding? Sometimes people get like, well, do I have to believe this or that or this or that? No, whatever you pray, wherever you pray, whatever you have inside your heart is God is where you go, and it is kind of you join at the center of your being with the God of your understanding. So that's kind of the idea, and it's about relationship. It's about relationship with God and others, and it is amazing to me how it really converts your heart.

Speaker 1 ([00:28:15](#)):

Gail it is a contemplative practice. Why is centering prayer called a prayer? As you've been describing it, it's very much on the surface, at least very different than prayers that we typically know of. We might say spontaneously, for pray for world peace, pray for my grandmother's cancer to go and pray. This is very different, it sounds like.

Speaker 2 ([00:28:49](#)):

Yes. Well, prayer has many do I want to say it flew out of my mind. There are aspects. First, it's a relationship with God. It's a great relationship of the God of your understanding. So how do you build a relationship? And you take it from getting to know God. And that's what we know as gathering information about God from the outside, I guess, and then spending time pondering about God. What is God? Who is God? Is there a God? All those questions that come up. And then just spending time with all of that and then allowing yourself to go even into a deeper place or in a quiet place. And in some ways, in that space, you're allowing God to introduce God's self to you in a different way than reading about knowing about praying prayers about. All those things are part of your devotional life, but we don't spend a lot of time allowing the spirit to introduce itself to us. And that's kind of what I think this aspect or this aspect of prayer is. I'm getting to know you. I'm getting to tell you a lot about me. I want you to cure my grandmother's cancer. I want you to do this. I want you to do that. And by the way, thanks for doing this, and thanks for doing that. And guess what happened yesterday and all those things, and then, oh, well, let me say a few prayers, and then you say a few prayers and then you go away.

([00:30:58](#)):

I sometimes think of it in terms of a relationship, and all of us probably have had this experience where you have a friend who tells you everything that's going on with them, and then you open your mouth to say, what's going on with you? And they say, oh, well, I think I have to go now. So I feel like this is a time when you do your praying and you say your prayers, and then you just wait in silence to see what the spirit has to say to you in silence. So it's not a spoken directive, it's just a conversion of heart over time. So it's a two-way street. In other words, it's not just a one-way street, which is what our normal prayer life, or at least from what I have discerned, is like you listen to something, you get inspired by something. It's all about you doing. You go to church, you go to worship services, you go to talks, you go here, you go there, but you don't really stop to allow the spirit to introduce itself to you. So this is an opportunity for that.

Speaker 1 ([00:32:17](#)):

Yeah, it's almost as if you're saying that you sort of bracket yourself for 20 minutes twice a day and allow something greater than yourself to express itself in inwardly it also perhaps outwardly to you, but to do that, you have to bracket the bracketing. It sounds like returning to the sacred word, that act of letting go of the mind, constant thinking, the engagement with thoughts is the bracketing process,

Speaker 2 ([00:33:03](#)):

And it's that moment, and it's very, very subtle and very, very quick. It's a moment. It's just a tiny moment in time.

([00:33:13](#)):

But over time, those moments get extended and expanded. So there is a place for your heart to come through. There's a place that is created a deeper well within you that eventually comes out of you at

particular times. You can reach into this well for the spirit to sort of speak through you in a way or giving permission to do with me what you will in a sense. And it's just amazing. It's an amazing experience, and no one can really, really explain it or really know what's happening. But over time you see that there's a lot more selflessness. There's a lot more gentleness there. There's a deeper desire to listen and really hear what somebody else is saying. You have somehow or another, it reinforces your inner strength because you're not constantly chattering or jumping in on something. You're able to just pause. I get a little newsletter in my email string thread, and the name of it is the pause. And that pause is what you're cultivating to take a moment to pause. You don't have to be breathless and then respond immediately to every single thing.

Speaker 1 ([00:35:01](#)):

Yeah, that's very hard to do in this online world we live in where there are thousands of things trying to grab our attention, our awareness, and to have us respond.

Speaker 2 ([00:35:16](#)):

Oh, yes, oh yes. And I mean, there's such an invitation, this whole thing, some of this stuff that you read and let's say on Facebook or one of those social media thing, they get you so revved up that when you read them, you can't wait to respond to them or that's all you want to do. You start talking to yourself while you're reading it and say, oh my, but you have to pause, take a moment and wait. Waiting is always seen as just so difficult, but it's just stop. And you know what? I think this whole, everything has its advantages and disadvantages, and I really feel that though this pandemic is nothing I would wish for. Certainly, however, it has been a pause for people who have never paused. And I'm sure a lot of people would complain about it, but I also feel that there had been, I mean, my own daughter-in-law, who's really a go, go, go, she's a trainer.

([00:36:35](#)):

She likes to do. She has endless clients and running and exercising with everyone. She says, mom, I just love that I don't have to do these things because I can't, and she doesn't have to come up with an excuse, or they're not having Friday night and Saturday night and Sunday afternoon things to do with the neighbors and the kids and this. And she said, mom, it's so great. It's just us. We're just here we're we kind of settle in. And it's been really a wonderful experience for their family. So thank God for that. And I think that this might help people to understand that in a way, this practice of centering prayer does the same thing. It puts you on pause for 20 minutes twice a day, not for six months, but it puts you on pause and it gives you a space where you can settle in and get to know who you are, and then in turn, get to know who the spirit is within you. So a grace, it's a real wonderful grace.

Speaker 1 ([00:38:00](#)):

Very good. What I'd like to do now is let's tie the centering prayer contemplative practice now back to the organization organism by way of talking about the overall mission, what contemplative outreach has tried to foster in over the years and how a little bit how it's done that if you're not out marketing and pushing your thing, you're letting people kind of come to you, so to speak. How is contemplative outreach sort of operated in terms of, I assume, letting people know about this practice?

Speaker 2 ([00:38:55](#)):

Well, I think over the years, there's always been the way we have shared centering prayer up until at least the time I retired, and I would imagine it's still the same. It's been really an invitation. Somebody calls and says, gee, we'd like to have a workshop. Could you send someone here to help? And that's

what we did. So it's a response to an invitation to come to my place and teach centering prayer. And very often there's a person in that group who has experienced centering prayer and somebody has asked them about it, or they've talked about it to their friends, and they say, I wonder if we can learn about it too. And that person usually says, oh, well, maybe I'll call and ask if we could do it. So over the years, that's the way it is really been person to person.

Speaker 1 ([00:40:01](#)):

So you're taking your lead from other people. You know what it sounds like, Gail, that you're describing is something called, and I'm sure you're familiar with this servant leadership, where you're leading in a sense, but you're leading is primarily being informed by what other people want rather than what you want as an organization, which is the way most organizations work, right? It's not really looking out to people and being open to what their invitations, what they need.

Speaker 2 ([00:40:47](#)):

Well, see, that's the truth. That's the truth of the way it's grown. And then people themselves would come and say, gee, we'd like to have a retreat on this. Could you do that? Do you know somewhere I could go on retreat? And then we'd develop retreats. See, every time people asked for something more, it was the group that was active that developed more for these people who were wanting more. And in fact, this was kind of an interesting experiment. I think we had a little newsletter that was one page, both sides at one page, and this newsletter we sent out about, and we would just say, we're going to have this workshop at st. so-and-so's, or we're going to go here, or the VFW Hall is going to be a place where we're going to offer a centering prayer workshop. So we did that, and then we also put a little inspirational, like a one paragraph that Father Thomas would write or someone else would write, and we'd send it out.

([00:41:56](#)):

Well, there was an idea. Somebody came up with the idea, and I remember this early on, I think it was still in the probably end of probably the early nineties. Why don't we have a 30 day retreat like they do with other organizations? I've heard of this. Why don't we try a 30 day retreat? So we put it in the newsletter and said, we're contemplating developing a 30 day retreat. And if we were to do that, would you be interested in attending? Let us know. There was not one person who responded to that request. And so we just looked at one another, said, well, this isn't our thing, I guess. And went on with the show. We didn't say, oh, well, we have to have a 30 day retreat Anyway, we just put out the feeler and said, nobody wants to do that. And so we said, we're not going to bother, but if you put it in and said, we're thinking of having a three day retreat and we're going to have it here and we're going to have it there, we get all these people who say, oh, we want to come.

([00:43:05](#)):

So we knew that way. That's how we knew that we would have this little newsletter that we sent down. And at first we only sent it out to maybe 500, 600 people, but over time, thousands of people, and they still, I think, advertise that way. And they have a website now and all kinds of things where people know that. But anytime there was any kind of idea, we threw it out first to see whether it was our idea or whether it was this promptings of the spirit to further the practice and help people more. We were in a helping profession, so to speak. We wanted to serve the people at their level of need. And the way you put it is like a servant leader. I think of it in terms of educational terms. There's a way to approach teaching bottoms up or top down. And I've always been a bottoms up teacher. So I taught school for, I don't know, seven, eight years maybe more. And I always taught the students at their level of need. I didn't try to, but I got the curriculum in, but I would introduce it in a way that I would see how they

received it. So that's what we did in contemplative outreach. And you can call that servant leader because we were serving people where they were.

Speaker 1 ([00:44:43](#)):

It sounds very different than supposedly someone asked Henry Ford about the creation of the automobile, and his response was he said, oh, yes. But if I had asked people what they wanted, they would've said a faster horse. That was not the contemplative outreach way I take it.

Speaker 2 ([00:45:10](#)):

No, no, it wasn't. But you know what? Over time, and I would say this, there were people, it didn't come from the people who were working in contemplative outreach at the time, or the people that were serving in all different capacities at the time. There were some who felt, for example, a website would be a great idea and some we were like, why? But they would talk about this. And then such things like websites. And another thing we talked about much earlier about data gathering, and we would just have people sign in their name, and that was it. No address, no nothing. And so then there was a point at which somebody said, well, gee, maybe we ought to get an email list and we'll go ahead and ask people to put their email address on. And well, what are we going to do with that?

([00:46:13](#)):

Well, you put it in the database and then you can let people know what's going on via email and blah, blah, blah. And it was like, oh, wow, that's a great idea. And so then we do things like that. But it was never something that I came across something of Mo when I was packing up. It was called the 10 year plan. And it was some of the things on the 10 year plan was stuff like, we'll gather every February and have a retreat and sit in silence and pray that the spirit will show us what we have to do next. Things like that. There was nothing like gather the data, get the email addresses, do this, do that. There was nothing like that on it, but everything on it. We did offer retreats and offer this, be available to people, do this, do that. And sure enough, we did all of that stuff. So it is fascinating how that happened, and we never looked at it. We put it in a file and didn't find it until I was retiring.

Speaker 1 ([00:47:29](#)):

The exemplar of that approach, if I could share a story, was Thomas Keating when he supposedly was going to retire from a monastery in Massachusetts to one in Colorado. And what he thought was going to happen was that he would retire and for the rest of his life, live the life of a monk and seclusion, so to speak. But apparently the story goes in the dead of winter. A church near the monastery invited him to come and present centering prayer. It just so happened that the day that the workshop was going to occur, there was a massive snowstorm. Thomas went, he showed up despite the snowstorm, and he said there were over 60 people that came. He said at that moment, he realized that his life future was going to be very different than what he thought because there were 60 plus people who were wanting something more in their life than they had. And they had some sense that this practice would have something to do with it. So that listening comes back again and again, listening to what's trying to be said is being said, what's trying to happen as opposed to what I think is trying to happen.

([00:49:10](#)):

It sounds like actually the contemplative practice actually is a way of operating the organization. Would you agree with that?

Speaker 2 ([00:49:21](#)):

I would agree with that. I would agree with that 100%. And some people would say, well, if we're going to hire somebody, we have to look for contemplatives and we have to do this, and we have to do that. And it was people who were practicing would be the people that would come forward, and those were the people you wanted. And they didn't necessarily have to have all the skill sets of the kind of job, so to speak, but they had to have the purity of heart to hear the spirit directing them in what contemplative outreach needed. And that's a hard person to find. And that was some of the things that we had to sort through over the years, because people are used to certain ways of operating, and they think that everything operates the same and they don't get what you're trying to do.

[\(00:50:30\)](#):

And they think that what you're trying to do is ridiculous and you're never going to get anywhere. Well, I would say that now, contemplative outreaches in all over the world, there are hundreds, thousands of people that have learned centering prayer. There are probably thousands of prayer groups all over the world. There are people who have opened themselves to all sorts of contemplative practice. I mean, look what you're doing. Here you are. If somebody had said to you many 20 years ago even, well, one day you're going to have a contemplative ball, it's going to be called all things contemplative. And you'd be like, what are you crazy? I work for, I'm a scientist. You know what I mean? So that's the same thing with me. I never aspired to be the administrator's template of outreach. I mean, that was not where I was going.

Speaker 1 [\(00:51:34\)](#):

Didn't want to be the president?

Speaker 2 [\(00:51:36\)](#):

No, I never wanted to be anything really. I was there being a helper. And I also did that for a volunteer for a while. I mean, as I said, I'm a teacher of the handicap. I'm an art therapist. I went to school for many years to practice that. I have a degrees in master's degree in psychology. I have all these worldly, what you call credentials. And then I wound up being the executive director and the president of template of outreach for 33 years. Why? And I know why. I mean, I know it was July of 1986, and I was at a meeting, and it was a board meeting, I think at the time, because we had incorporated, and one of the requirements is to have a board. We had a board of these same people that had been hanging out, and Mary Mki was the executive director, and she was one of the persons that was on that retreat in New Mexico and the one who had the prayer group in Long Island, and they were talking about a community. Thomas looked at her in his own little sweet way, and he said, well, Mary, how would you like to lead that community? A live-in type community experiment? And her eyes lit up kind of. And she said, oh, sure, Tom is what? She always called him. It was, that sounds like a good idea. I mean, none of us called him Tom, that's for sure. But she always did. Well, I'm the executive director now, and I can't do both things. Oh, no, you couldn't do both things. So he said, well, what do we do?

[\(00:53:31\)](#):

And Mary looked over at me and she said, well, Gail is ready. And I sort of said, what? And Thomas looked at me, he said, oh, yes, you're more than ready. And I'm thinking to myself, what are they seeing? Do I have a neon sign on my head ready? I don't know. I was just befuddled by that. I said, I dunno anything about this. Well, you're so systematic. I said, well, that's just part of my personality. Oh, you could do this with no trouble. Are you willing? And here's what I said. I am willing to try to do whatever it is you'd like for me to do, but I also want you to tell me if I'm not doing what it is you want me to do, and if you would agree to that, I will agree to give it my best. And that's what I did for 33

years, 35 years. I don't remember at the time I learned as I went along in a way, that whole bottom up approach was really what I used. So it was fascinating.

Speaker 1 ([00:54:42](#)):

One of the questions that I try to ask each guest on the podcast is, and I'm going to ask you that question now, what makes

Speaker 2 ([00:54:58](#)):

I'll take

Speaker 1 ([00:54:59](#)):

I, sorry, go ahead.

Speaker 2 ([00:55:01](#)):

I said, I'll take a pause.

Speaker 1 ([00:55:03](#)):

Take a pause. What makes something contemplative? Anything? What makes something contemplative?

Speaker 2 ([00:55:16](#)):

My first response is the eye of the beholder. So I mean, there are things that are contemplative, I guess by nature, in nature that are just contemplative moments or whatever. But I think the eye of the beholder is a person who is a contemplative. And you don't necessarily have to call yourself or know that, but that you see beyond what you're looking at. You see what beyond what you're looking at, and you hear beyond what you're hearing. And so I think that's where that contemplative dimension resides in that unstructured place that is further than the limitations of our senses and shows itself. So to me, it's almost like it sparkles with the spirit and you catch it, you catch it. I can remember being a little kid one time, and I was sitting somewhere, I don't know, I guess it was on a beach or somewhere like that.

([00:56:41](#)):

And all of a sudden I saw this. I think I was looking at the sky and I saw what I thought was a bright light come like a flash. And I said to my mother, what was that? She said, well, what? I said, what just happened? She said, nothing happened. But there was something that revealed itself to me in the clouds that I saw, but she didn't see it and she couldn't explain it, and I couldn't explain it either. To me, that's where that whole contemplative dimension lies. And I think it's the eyes of the beholder. I don't know. What do you think?

Speaker 1 ([00:57:27](#)):

Well, that word you used of revelation, typically we think of revelation being like a big deal, like something major, but it could be something very seemingly small. I would agree with you. I would add to the senses, looking beyond the senses. In fact, the word, it's interesting, the word transcendence simply means going beyond to transcend something. If I transcend my pain in my knee, I'm somehow going beyond it in some way, in some fashion. I would also add, in addition to the senses, which you indicated, just our general thinking, conceptual mind and what it thinks is right and wrong and desirable and undesirable, even though some of those things may be desirable and undesirable and letting go of that

for periods of time in the moment in the, so-called here and now such that we can be available, keyword available to what might be trying to reveal

Speaker 2 ([00:58:52](#)):

Itself.

Speaker 1 ([00:58:54](#)):

So if one is interested, as I am in photography in the visual world, I know you're very interested in the visual world. If I let go of what I think is beautiful, sunsets are beautiful. Yes, nice flowers are beautiful, but I actually let go of that mind. I make myself available to seeing other things that I might have overlooked and that I might've not noticed that turn out to be very beautiful. But they don't meet my preexisting conceptual notions about what beauty is or to step it up to the level of God. If I let go of my conceptual understanding of what that is, then I open myself. I make myself available to learning, experiencing something different beyond those concepts. So for me, it is very much involved with seeing the value of our conceptual mind, our thinking, our discursive mind, all the great things it can do. And it can also realizing that there's more beyond if I make myself available. So I would add that, tack that off to your understanding.

Speaker 2 ([01:00:30](#)):

So could we say then it's possibilities, being able to see possibilities all of a sudden, rather than having a certain way of looking at something? There's a multitude of possibilities when you don't have a way of, I guess a planned way of looking at things or an always kind of format of, this looks like this all the time, but that you look for the possibilities and you see them. And the more you look, the more you see. And so going back to that idea, the eyes of the beholder, so it's more than what meets the eye. It's more than just seeing a dog. There's lots of different aspects.

Speaker 1 ([01:01:28](#)):

Yeah. To return to the title of this podcast organization or organism, you said it's both at times, it was one, it was the other. Is it still both, you think?

Speaker 2 ([01:01:46](#)):

I would imagine. I mean, I would imagine it is. I think from what I hear, I mean, I don't really have any involvement with the organization whatsoever, but from what I understand, they have fewer people working and they have different things. But I would imagine that they still maintain the 501C3 because I think they still do fundraising and stuff like that. And that's a requirement. They have a board of sorts. So yeah, I think they're both in, I think of it as almost like the organization part is kind of like the spine that holds the body up and the body can move around and do what it does because it has a balance that kind of keeps it upright, let's say. So I think there's something of that. There's a give and take and an important part that the structure plays to an organic group or an organic, I don't know what to call it, but an organism.

([01:03:09](#)):

So if you have an organism, and I think it's nice to be able to have a blend of the two because I think one supports the other. And without that kind of thing, such as, let's say the mailing list with the email addresses of all these people, we couldn't really reach out to a lot of people. That's a very useful thing to have. The website is entirely useful for people. So one balance is out the other and the personal

interpersonal relationships still are very, very important. And so I think one is supported by the other, and it is helpful. It's helpful just like in our own very lives, we all have certain things that we have an organic movement of our life, but we also have a certain structure to our day. Nature has a certain structure in it as well. So I think it tells us that there's a use for that.

Speaker 1 ([01:04:28](#)):

I don't know whether I, a podcast can be conducted contemplatively or not, but if you're willing, I'd like to try it right now, unplanned. Sure. Which is, as our time is coming drawing to a close, what else Gail needs to be said about anything you've touched on or anything you haven't touched on?

Speaker 2 ([01:05:06](#)):

I think one thing that I think the enormous gratitude that I have for Thomas Keating and his willingness to sort of jump in the pool with everybody. I mean, this was not what he planned, but he was a man of discernment. He was a man of the spirit, and he was always looking for the spirit to guide him and the organization. And what tremendous gratitude I have for his trust in his openness. Because if he were not the person he was, he would've put some real, I think he would've put some strong boundaries around it in trying to figure out, I don't know. I don't know. I just feel that there was a certain level of trust that he had in the group discernment. That was an absolute model to me of how to be a listener and listen for the word of God to guide your life.

([01:06:41](#)):

And I think he did that. And I also know that he made some mistakes. And I know that certainly I have, and I'm sure you have, but it was never what over it. It never stopped. Just made a turn. Just if this didn't work, okay, we'll try this. I mean, there was a certain level of that as well. So there was a flexibility in him. And I don't think it was his nature. I think it was something that he developed over the years. And I think that we helped him to do that. The lay people that he worked with because he was not used to that. He was used to working with monks. And so that's what I'm left with that just gratitude.

Speaker 1 ([01:07:35](#)):

Gratitude. I think a lot of people join you, Gail, in those feelings of gratitude and certainly the proof that's been in the pudding, so to speak, how it's affected people and transformed people.

Speaker 2 ([01:07:52](#)):

And I think it was way beyond it. He knew it was way beyond his imaginings. It wasn't anything he kind of signed on for, but it was what he committed to as he saw it grow. And he did it. It's so funny because he joined the most austere order, and his idea was to be in silence for his whole life. And that was just exactly what he did not do. But he has silence now, and I'm sure he's quite grateful for it. And I know that when I saw him when he was dying, and I sat with him and I said, Thomas, is there something you want to do or you want me to do? Is there anything I could do for you? He said, yes. I said, oh good. What? Let's just sit here in silence. And I said, oh, okay. That's easy.

Speaker 1 ([01:08:53](#)):

That's easy.

Speaker 2 ([01:08:54](#)):

And that's what he wanted. That's what he wanted. And it was lovely. It was lovely. I couldn't ask for anything more, and that's what he wanted. So that's what we did. So it's beautiful.

Speaker 1 ([01:09:08](#)):

So Gail, I want to thank you very much. I have great gratitude for you. I know you've been retired now from contemplative outreach and are not, as you say that involved. And I really do appreciate your coming out, so to speak, to do this podcast and to share a bit of your story, contemplative Outreach's story, Thomas Keating's story. In the show notes, I'll be listing some resources for individuals if they want to follow up about on contemplative outreach, centering prayer, Thomas. So I'll be posting those on the podcast website. Again, I want to remind folks that if you have topics or guests that you would like me to invite on the podcast, let me know. Contact me. So in closing, Gail, anything you want to say or add?

Speaker 2 ([01:10:11](#)):

Well, I just want to thank you for doing this, Ron, and I hope it can be helpful or useful or not to whatever, be assured of my complete consent of editing out anything you feel so moved to do. But there's so much to be said about what happened and how it happened and where it happened, and why that it's impossible to put it all in an hour or however long we've been talking. But I hope I hit some of the high points and I hope it's helpful.

Speaker 1 ([01:10:49](#)):

I think you have very successfully. Very successfully.

Speaker 2 ([01:10:54](#)):

Yeah, it's been a pleasure to do it. I mean, it really is. It's sort of a little trip down memory lane in a way, and that's always a nice thing.

Speaker 1 ([01:11:05](#)):

Right, right. Well, farewell, we'll be in touch down the road. Thank you. And with that, this episode of All Things Contemplative comes to a close. I hope you found it interesting and informative and will join me for the next episode piece.