

Welcoming Practice

Developed by Mary Mrozowski, an early practitioner and teacher of Centering Prayer, the Welcoming Practice is a simple but decidedly not easy prayer practice that can be used at any time during the day, in any circumstance, anywhere in the cycle of habitual behavior. It breaks the top-down influence of customary reaction by engaging us thoroughly in the present. It is a practice that involves both surrender and attention, teaching us to detach from the ruminations of the mind and pay attention to the body. We **notice** our behavior; we **focus and sink** into our bodily sensations; we **welcome** the sensations; we **let them go**.

Noticing

Welcoming Practice begins when we **notice** that we are behaving in a way that is habitual. We may “come to” in the middle of a reaction or hours later; in either situation, Welcoming Practice is an appropriate response.

Noticing, however, is not completely under our control. It is the result of willingness, rather than will. That split second is a gift and a matter of grace. The willingness to see ourselves clearly normally precedes those moments of insight, especially when the behavior in question is deeply ingrained.

In order to become willing, most of us have to fail first. I surely wish that I could just intend to live more lovingly without having to become aware of the places where I am unloving, but it simply isn't possible. So the times that we find ourselves going over the waterfall, as Cynthia Bourgeault says, are really times for which we should be grateful. They provide us with the emotional impetus to become willing to change.

Like any behavior, the ability to see ourselves clearly is strengthened when we pay attention to it, and weakened when we ignore it. If we pledge ourselves to notice these uncomfortable glimpses of reality, we will become aware of them more often; if we regularly ignore these pieces of information, we won't see them even when our best friends shows us a video of our behavior. So our work in the first step, **notice**, is cultivating the willingness to attend to that split second of disagreeable information about our own conduct.

Focus and Sink In

No matter when that clear vision comes—whether on the spot or days later—the next step is to **focus on the feeling in my body**, and **sink in** to that feeling. The key is to paying attention to how the body feels, not to our emotions. The emotional content may be *I feel so ashamed of myself!* or *He just did that same thoughtless thing again!* But that's the story; that's the ego-self talking. To focus on the current physical reality means that we ask, *How does it feel right now?* We check the chest, neck, stomach, shoulders; we might notice arms and hands, legs, face. We may find clenching or nausea, tightness or dull ache. It is normal to want to ignore or push away these physical feelings; they can be acutely uncomfortable. But if we

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concentrate faithfully on our physical self, that focus will bring us into the present, and the present is the place where we encounter reality. The past, full of drama and justification and emotion, is a faulty map for the territory of the present.

Attending to the reality of our bodily feeling can be almost unbearable. But instead of pushing away the discomfort, sink into it. Consciously relax your muscles and feel how you feel. And when shame—*I can't cry now, it would be humiliating!*—or judgment—*I should know better than to get upset by this!*—threaten to take you away from your feelings, remember that these assessments and categorizations are merely habitual mental responses. They aren't useful right now. The work is simply feeling how the body feels.

It is important to remind ourselves that welcoming practice is not psychological analysis. Nothing destroys the effectiveness of the practice more than exploring why I feel a certain way (*This happened all the time when I was a kid!*), or attempting to justify my feelings (*I know I was right when I said that*). This kind of thinking moves us back into our cognitive maelstrom, where emotions and justification swirl. We get control—of a sort—over that mental storm by choosing a story and telling it to ourselves. But when we pay attention to our body, we are accepting what is rather than trying to impose order on it. This simple acceptance is a powerful spiritual response to the painful and habitual ways of thinking that rob us of our essential freedom.

If you have ever had a loved one die, you will know the value of having someone witness your grief. The person who says, *I see how painful this is for you* is a wiser friend than the one who says, *You'll get over this*. The only way to “get over” suffering is to go through it: we need to feel it. When we pay attention to the discomfort in our body, we are witnessing to that broken place in us. By treating ourselves with respect, we begin the healing.

What I just said—that the only way to get over suffering is to go through it—that's a hell of a lot easier to say than to feel. This is the work of a lifetime. And we don't do it so we don't have to suffer anymore; we're human and by definition there will be suffering! But we do this work because being present to our own suffering draws us to push our taproot more deeply into the Reality of Infinite Love (aka to trust in God), so that we can be more present to the suffering of the world.

Welcome

When we are able to stay with—to witness—how our body feels right now, then it's time to **welcome** the feeling. We don't simply acknowledge the feeling; we invite it in. *Welcome sadness*, I might say. *Welcome tightness*. *Welcome anxiety*. *Welcome weeping*.

Notice that we welcome the feeling, not the cause. If I were recovering from chemotherapy, I might welcome nausea, but I would not welcome cancer. I might welcome my anger when a friend has betrayed me; I would not welcome betrayal. I

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might welcome my feeling of shame and fear in the face of abuse; I would not welcome abuse. We are not inviting the things that would harm us to take up residence. We are simply letting our dear body know that its feelings are noticed, and respected. We cradle ourselves in our suffering.

At this point we begin a movement back and forth between welcoming and feeling. We continue surrendering to the reality of the feeling and inviting it to be fully present. We try to erect no mental barriers against its presence in us. This movement of welcome often begins to diminish the discomfort.

Letting Go

As we alternate between sinking into the feeling and welcoming it, we begin to release our physical distress. As we notice it lessen, we simply **let it go** for now. We won't be able to let it go forever, particularly if this distress is a feeling associated with habitual behavior. But we can let it go for now. We **let go** of what is happening in the present—these feelings of sadness, or fear, or shame. We also **let go** of our illusions about reality, the story we've told ourselves about what this is all about. And we **let in** the possibility of a new future, based on an accurate reading of our bodily selves.

Surrender to what we are feeling internally is not the same as surrendering externally. The point of welcoming practice is to make us present and accountable to ourselves. When I step out of Welcoming Practice—when I have calmed myself and called myself out of reactive behavior—I can then make a considered decision about what response *is* warranted. If I am being abused, I can decide to take steps to end it. If I am ill, I can sort out what I need to do to take care of myself. If I am being unjust, I can change my behavior. If I have been betrayed, I may choose to have a conversation with the person in question. But these decisions arise from a still and calm centre, a place that knows and accepts life on life's terms. We make our choices centered in love and the calm power of acceptance.

Welcoming practice is not blanket approval of what's happening in the world; it's not saying *Well, it doesn't really matter*. It is not a "Get out of jail free" pass for people who harm others. It is a way to haul ourselves out of our fantasies and fears into the actual reality of life, and to make discriminating choices from that place of knowledge.

Mary Mrozowski developed a kind of litany that she used as the last step in her own welcoming practice. A black belt version of the practice, it goes like this:

I let go my desire for security and survival.
I let go my desire for esteem and affection.
I let go my desire for power and control.
I let go my desire to change the situation.

Notice that we aren't letting go of security and survival, esteem and affection, or

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power and control; we're letting go of our *desire* for these things. We are letting go of the attachments that keep us wound up tight and worried: do I have enough, is someone taking what I want, am I being treated fairly, am I really loved, do I have any real influence on others, can I control what happens to me? While these are all normal human concerns, hardwired into our bodies, worrying about them is a distraction. Suppose that a concern is legitimate: I just lost my job and I don't have the money for rent. Thinking *I'm going to be homeless* over and over doesn't constitute a solution: it constitutes an obsession. Knowing reality—*I'm broke*—is the starting point for a solution, and solutions can more easily be identified when we are calm and centered.

The real kicker in Mary Mrozowski's litany is that last sentence, I let go of my desire to change the situation. Let me confess that much of my life, spiritual practice has been aimed at relieving my profound inner discomfort. I usually want nothing more than to change the situation—without any real work on my part! Sort of like the old joke from AA, I wanted to go pray in a dark closet when I was hungry so God would float a hotdog through the key hole.

When I give up my desire to change a situation, no matter how appalling that situation may be, I am standing in an internal place of profound openness. Paradoxically, this is the strongest part of my self; this is the Self that cannot be damaged or abused or killed. It is the point where I place infinite trust in the Holy and lean back. The worst may indeed happen. But the worst is no longer the worst when I know that in my depths, Infinite Love is streaming through.