

# CENTERED LISTENING

A PRACTICE FOR OPENING YOUR AWARENESS



I came to deer hunting a little later than most. I attended the mandatory hunter safety course in my mid-twenties in a classroom surrounded by 12-year-old boys. I did crush my classmates in the final test though.

My first experience with white-tailed deer hunting was in the hills of South Dakota. My uncle—a giant Norwegian of a Midwesterner—and I did what is called a “spot and stalk hunt,” walking quietly through a public land tract looking to catch a deer by surprise. It’s easy to keep your attention heightened in such a situation, moving through a new place, knowing a deer could be just around the bend. I returned home empty-handed but taken by the excitement of hunting.

A few years later a friend invited me to hunt on his farmland in eastern North Carolina. On the forty-acre property were several deer stands: simple little buildings rising at least 8 feet off the ground, providing cover from detection and an angle towards the ground for a safe bullet trajectory. This type of hunting is called “still hunting” and it’s a lot of sitting and waiting for a deer to pop out of the woods and walk into range. It’s exciting in its own way, but it’s not easy to keep your attention heightened staring at an empty field for hours on end. As I sat quietly in the stand I experienced something psychologists call “stimulus-independent, task-unrelated thought,” or spacing out. Every few minutes I had to remind my mind to wake up and pay attention.

Spacing out is a natural function of our brains and it’s helpful to us in various ways (creativity, rest, etc.). However, when you’re practicing spiritual listening in your neighborhood it’s important to keep your senses awakened, seeking a gentle nudge from God. For this task I have borrowed a practice from centering prayer. Centering prayer is a method of contemplative prayer which gained recognition through the work of Fr. Thomas Keating. It seeks to open one’s awareness to God’s presence by silently repeating a sacred word or phrase. Having a sacred word or phrase can also awaken your observational senses and open up your attention to the people and places around you.

So next time you’re walking through your neighborhood or driving through town, try to avoid spacing out by saying a quick prayer/centering phrase like, “Be opened,” or, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” God might reveal something new to you amidst a familiar setting. Centered listening might be your first step towards deeper connection with God and your neighbors.