

The Centered Life

Awakened Called Set Free Nurtured

by Jack Fortin

Foreword by Richard Bliese

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Centered Life
AN INITIATIVE OF LUTHER SEMINARY

*I would like to dedicate this book
to my loving wife and soul mate, Sara,
who has been the primary shaping influence
in my life and work.*

THE CENTERED LIFE
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St. Paul, Minnesota, provides a framework for change for congregations that strive to teach their people about their callings in daily life. Lutherans have lamented the fact for five hundred years that Luther's insights into the priesthood of all believers has been neglected by our congregations. Now is the time to do something about that. This book points the way forward.

The major emphases of the Reformation were twofold: justification by grace through faith, and vocation. A local congregational mission strategy that strives to be faithful and effective must build on both dynamics. Luther left his monastery and entered the world, thus starting a religious reformation. A major goal of this book is to address the unfinished reformation in American congregations. It is time for Christians in North America to leave their own monasteries as well. A new reformation awaits them.

Wonderful examples, anecdotes, concrete suggestions, and biblical directions fill every page concerning living a life of belonging, identity, and meaning centered in Christ. This is a book that you will want to read over and over again—and one that you will want to discuss with your friends and your small-group members.

Once you start reading this book in your congregation, watch out! God will use this book to initiate change. That is its purpose. The more centered in Christ we become, the more we are opened to God's mission in the world. Thanks be to God for Jack Fortin's commitment to call us all to lives centered in Christ.

—Richard Bliese
President, Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota

Chapter 1

Longing for a Centered Life

"I seem to be one person when I'm visiting my mother in the nursing home, another when I'm with my friends at the health club, still another at work, and someone else at church. Sometimes I have a hard time keeping all my separate selves straight. I feel like a chameleon. I wonder, Which one is the real me?"

"As a single mom, I feel torn to pieces by all the demands on my time. I try to do a good job at work and be a good parent to my kids and take care of my dad when he needs my help. I have no time for myself. I feel overwhelmed. I feel as if I don't do anything well. My life seems to be falling apart into a million pieces."

"I looked forward to retirement and thought it would be the best time of my life. But after a few months of golfing and a Caribbean cruise, I'm restless and bored. I still want my life to have some meaning. I'm not ready to give up on life yet."

"At work I'm being asked by my supervisors to do things that I think are quasi-moral and maybe even illegal, but

basically I like my job, and, frankly, I'm afraid of losing it. I'm not finding any moral guidance at church. The sermons and Bible studies never seem to have anything to do with the situations I'm facing. I'm not sure my pastor has any idea of the issues I face at work."

"I have two friends, both of whom are dedicated, committed Christians. One believes that being a Christian means opposing abortion, gay marriage, and gun control. She fully supports the war in Iraq. The other is for gay rights, peace, and the rights of immigrants. I admire both of them for their convictions but often I feel torn between them."

Voices like these, and many others, express what many people are feeling in our society: a loss of identity, fragmentation, meaninglessness, a loss of control, feeling alone, adrift without a moral compass, confused, anxious.

We long for a more centered life, a sense of wholeness, a more peaceful, confident life. We want a place to belong, and we want our lives to count for something worthwhile. The good news is that this is possible. It is possible to live a centered life. We are not meant to live divided and fragmented lives. God intends for us a life of wholeness, belonging, and meaning. This book will explore the process of moving toward a centered life.

Our Fragmented Lives

Although many of us yearn for a more centered life, we find it very difficult to get there. Why is it so hard? A first step is to understand some of the trends in our society that tend to pull our lives apart and leave us without a center.

The rapid pace of change. Daily life around 1800 was not much different from daily life in the time of Jesus. People traveled only as fast as a horse could run or a ship could sail. Messages traveled at the same speed. But beginning with the Industrial Revolution the lives of many people, at least in the industrialized nations, have experienced an increasingly rapid change of pace so that Alvin Toffler had to coin a new term, *future shock*, to describe this. Peter Vail, professor of human systems at the University of St. Thomas, uses an image from canoeing to say that we are living in a "world of permanent white water."¹

Closely related is the speeding up of the amount and the diversity of information that bombards us every day—through printed materials, radio and TV, computers, cell phones, and a host of new gadgets. To protect themselves from this information overload, people put up more "mental filters," so that while it used to be that someone had to hear a message eight times for it to soak in, now it takes twenty-seven repetitions.²

Mobility. Few of us live in one place for very long. We set down only shallow roots. Few of us work at one job for thirty or forty years. We no longer can trust corporations to provide us with a secure future. We no longer are surrounded by supportive friends and relatives. Among other things, this deprives us of a sense of accountability.

When I was a teenager, I worked at Johnny's Grocery Store in Rockford, Illinois, stocking shelves. I decided that I wasn't making enough money to buy my favorite potato chips, and I discovered that I could tuck one of those bags of chips inside my jacket on the way out of the store. I grew so successful at this that I started to shoplift larger and larger bags. Then one day as I was leaving, Johnny stopped me, unzipped my jacket, and the potato chips dropped out.

Because this was still a town where people had relationships with store owners, including a charge account, within ten minutes my parents were at the store talking with Johnny. For the next three months I was stocking shelves at no cost to Johnny. My father said, "Remember that when you cheat your neighbor, the cost is high."

In the search for the kind of community that used to exist more commonly, we are seeing a move from our big cities into smaller towns, where people can again know their neighbors and find security and support. There are also new suburban developments of "clustered housing" that seek to create the feeling of an old-fashioned neighborhood.

Specialization. As more and more low-skilled jobs are moved from the United States to Third World factories, the remaining jobs require highly skilled workers—specialists. Such specialization is necessary (I want my surgeon to be an expert at what he is doing), but it has a negative side. By giving myself over to a medical specialist, I may lose control and ownership of my own health care. Someone who performs only one specialized task in a project may lose the sense of the whole.

Diversity. Many of us grew up in towns or neighborhoods where everyone was basically like us. When I was a boy in Rockford, Illinois, there were basically two kinds of people—Swedes and Italians. The Swedes were Lutheran, and the Italians were Roman Catholic. And we thought that was diversity. Now even rural areas include people of diverse cultures and religions. Texas has now become the fourth state in which the "minorities" are a "majority," in which Caucasians are outnumbered by all others. (The other three states are California, New Mexico, and Hawaii.)

Our cities and towns and townships are no longer predominantly Christian. In many areas fewer and fewer people identify themselves as Christians or churchgoers. In North America and Europe, Christian culture seems to be in a decline, while in the southern hemisphere Christian churches are growing dramatically. We're living in a land with many cultures and religions—or with no religious background at all. Even within Christianity we tend to be divided or even polarized into factions.

Compartmentalization. Each of us lives in multiple communities, anywhere from four to seven. We may have one community that is our family, another our congregation, another our work, another our political party, still another a hobby or special interest group. Each of these communities has differing expectations and demands upon us. In each one we are known only in part. People yearn to bring their many selves together into one place where they can be whole and where they are known well.

Unrealistic expectations. We are driven by the message, "You can have it all if you just achieve the right balance." And so we run frantically from place to place, trying to have career, family, a rich social life, a gorgeous body, an influence in the community, a spiritual life.

Isolation. Driven in part by the proliferation of i-media, many of us find it easier and more convenient to interact with the world through electronic devices. Instead of joining other people in a movie theater, we watch a video or DVD in the privacy of our homes. We order our clothes online, perhaps even our groceries. Some "go to church" via radio, TV, or iPod. Instead of talking with a friend or colleague, we send an e-mail message. Some teenagers are reported to spend four hours a day exchanging text messages. Even within our homes we isolate ourselves from

family members around our own TVs, our own computers, our own telephones.

These tools are by no means all bad. They offer us opportunities to keep in touch with people we might not communicate with otherwise. They offer us convenience and privacy, but they also result in a loss of community, of face-to-face contact with real people. For this reason some critics have strongly urged us to limit our use of these electronic media. One has called for a media sabbath, taking one day of the week without these electronic gadgets. When asked how we can find or create community, Minnesota writer Bill Holm, said, "Turn off the television and get to know your neighbors!"

A climate of fear. Bombarded with messages about terrorism, violence, crime, and financial crisis, we live in a culture of fear, described well by Lutheran Bishop Mark Hanson:

Far too often, when fear becomes our orientation to the world, we either withdraw into isolation or resort to acts of aggression. Fear hardens lives and closes borders.

Fear prevents us from being open to the radical newness of God's promises that call us to a life of faith.³

Church: The Solution or Part of the Problem?

Can we find a place that allows us to relate to a center, that helps us bring the diverse parts of our lives into some harmony? It is my conviction that the local congregation can be the place where this happens for us. Congregations are the best places for God's people to be inspired and equipped to live out their callings each day. In the congregation people can be led to find their center in God, as revealed in Jesus

Christ. At its best, the congregation can then offer us a safe place in which we can talk about the brokenness, fragmentation, and challenges of our daily lives, and where we can explore how to live our faith in every arena of our lives.

I recognize that too often the congregation does not do this. As I have heard from many people, they find little connection between Sunday worship and the everyday life of Monday and the rest of the week. At times the local congregation can even cause greater divisions for us by dividing us up into age groups or special interest groups or by giving us still more things to do. Church leaders reinforce the Sunday-to-Monday disconnect when they focus on internal maintenance, church growth, and programs instead of equipping people for work and ministry in God's world. The congregation then becomes yet one more competitor for our time.

But I believe it is possible to find support and guidance for a centered life in the congregation. The Centered Life Initiative at Luther Seminary in St. Paul provides a framework for change, seeking to ignite renewal in congregations, making them places where people gather, encounter Christ in word and sacrament, experience the support of Christian community, become equipped for everyday mission and ministry and then scattered to serve God in their many vocational settings.⁴ We will explore that potential of congregational life further in chapter 5.

The Myth of the Balanced Life

Some social commentators have suggested that the answer to the divided life is a balanced life. Although they have some valuable things to say, I find that the balanced life is finally a myth; it can't be done. In a balanced life, I try to

stay in control of my life and try to find ways to balance the various facets of my life: work, family, personal care, friendships, community life, and political involvement. The problem with this is that it keeps us self-absorbed, and the elements of our lives rarely stay in balance. Think of what happens, for example, when you have a sick child. Your goal then is not to maintain a balance, but to take immediate care of that child.

The alternative to a balanced life is a faithful life. It is a life faithful, moment by moment, to the God in whom we live and move and have our being. It is a centered life. The perfect example of the faithful life is Jesus Christ. Jesus often worked long hours despite the objections of his disciples, and at other times he withdrew from people and tended to his own needs for rest, reflection, and prayer.

Personal Exercise: How Centered Are You?

Take a few moments to reflect on your own life. To what extent is each of these statements true about you?

1. I regularly take time to reflect on God's work in my life.
2. I genuinely feel guided by God each day in the decisions I make.
3. Others can see my faith in action in the way I tackle daily tasks.
4. When things are tough for me, I get encouragement from other church members.
5. Knowing my own strengths helps me see how God has called me to serve others.
6. I see my work as a calling.
7. God created me with a unique pattern of strengths and talents.

8. Each day I am able to see how God is sending me out to do God's work.
9. I feel strongly connected to people in my church.

Christ: The Way to a Centered Life

We are not meant to live divided lives. We are made for wholeness and integrity.

God has placed within us a yearning to find a place where we experience a sense of belonging and make a difference in the world. This yearning raises questions:

- How do we know what we were created to be?
- How do we find those places where we can make a difference?
- Where can we experience a sense of belonging?

For Christians, the answers to these questions begin with God, the God who has created us, who has redeemed us, who dwells within us as power and presence. A life centered in the triune God gives identity and a place to stand in a chaotic and compartmentalized world. The Creator God is present in all I do. Christ is the example and provides the means for how I am to live and love in God's world. The Holy Spirit is the voice within me that guides the way I live.

With God as the center of my life, I know *whose* I am and can begin to discover *who* I am. I know what God created me to be. I have a prevailing sense of my unique pattern of strengths and use these strengths to create a more trustworthy world. Knowing my unique strengths helps me understand God's purposes and will for my life.

God calls us first to himself. We come to know God through Jesus Christ. We are found by God, and we find

God. Pastor Chris Bellefeuille of St. Barnabas Lutheran Church in Plymouth, Minnesota, said in a sermon, "Jesus seeks you out and finds you because you each have a unique role, a unique ministry in the kingdom. From the lowest, the least, and the lost to those who feel they might be on pretty firm footing, each of you is being sought. You have been forgiven and washed in grace so that you might be able to live as found people."⁵

From the beginnings of history—and before—God revealed himself to humankind through the creation (Romans 1) and through special people called prophets, but God revealed himself most clearly by becoming one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:1-2). Now when we want to know who God is and what God is like, we have only to look to Jesus, who not only teaches us the truths of God but who embodies that truth. In his paraphrase of the New Testament, J. B. Phillips has this striking presentation: "Now Christ is the visible expression of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

In this book I speak out of who I am, from my center as a Christian. At the same time I respect those of other faiths or no faith, as the apostle Peter learned, "that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). I believe I can help others most by being true to my own center.

In John 1:14 we read: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." In and through Jesus we come to know the truths about God and ourselves

and life, but also God's grace, God's unconditional acceptance of us apart from our achievements.

Referring to the biblical story, twentieth-century Lutheran preacher Edmund Steimle wrote:

It's the story of living, sweating, rejoicing, struggling, dying men and women just like you, just like me. And the story tells of a God not apart from their daily ordinary lives, but smack in the middle of them. So it's my story too. And your story. Rejoice in it. Give thanks and sing. For the hope is not fanciful or ephemeral; it is rooted in a God who enters into the dirt and dust and joys of life precisely where you are now. Just like a child in the dust and dirt and joy of a stable.⁶

Faith is my saying "yes" to God's grace. A faithful centered life is my response to God's love and blessing.

Embodied Good News

Although I had heard the Christian gospel in my home and at my Methodist church, the gospel came alive for me when I was a teenager in Rockford, Illinois. I grew up in a family in which both parents were educators. My father grew up on a forty-acre farm in northwest Wisconsin. His father was a logger and consequently often absent from home. My father needed a friend outside the family. A Methodist preacher recognized my father's musical gifts and took him into his own home and helped him get a college education. My mother also assumed that the way to make a life was through education, but she grew up in a very nurturing family and brought that spirit of nurture into our family.

I knew that both my parents loved me, but I also felt that their approval was connected, at least in part, with my performing well.

The school system I was in was very competitive both in academics and in sports. It was very important for me to do well in school and to make a good showing in tennis and wrestling. In the classroom one of the most common test questions was "compare and contrast . . ." and I learned the lesson well—to compare my own life with everyone else's.

One problem with having your identity formed by comparing yourself with others is that after a while it is not enough to win; someone else has to lose. I had to feel good at the expense of someone else feeling bad. Another problem is that I can't get straight "X's in everything; there is always someone else who's better.

I realized that in the fight for grades and for winning in sports, I confused approval or disapproval of my achievements with acceptance or rejection of my person, who I was.

I began to get a different message through a youth worker, a staff member of Young Life, named Bruce Sundberg, who began hanging out with me and my friends on the tennis court. For the first time we experienced an adult taking an interest in us, listening to us, without trying to change or control us. He won our allegiance, so much so that we even started to follow his example by wearing Hush Puppies.

Bruce did not let us make him a hero. He articulated to us in simple words the story of Jesus' death and resurrection and God's forgiveness. He said in effect, "I'm coming to you because I want to reflect a God who loves you more than I do and who will be with you when I am not."

Through Bruce I experienced God's unconditional love not just in words but embodied in a person. I came to believe that I was accepted because of God's grace and love and not because of what I did, well. I had a sense of acceptance that set me free from an identity formed only by comparing myself with others.

In the community of faith there is the potential for discovering my value by virtue of my being a child of God through baptism. At Jesus' baptism God the Father declared, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). I too can learn to hear God say, "You are my child. I love you, accept you, care for you unconditionally, apart from your achievements." But I also need to have this unconditional love embodied in persons in my life. And God has given me these gifts over and over in the course of my spiritual journey.

My Unique Center

Finding God, or having been found by God as I have come to know God in Christ, I can truly know myself. I know myself as a child of God, a creation of God. I am not God, but I have been created by God and for God. As Saint Augustine wrote in his spiritual autobiography: "You have made us for yourself, O God, and we are never at rest until we rest in you." The early twentieth-century spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill wrote:

A spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the centre, where we are anchored in God: a life soaked through and through by a sense of [divine] reality and claim, and self-given to the great movement of [God's] will.⁷

God created me with a unique set of gifts and potentials, as unique as my fingerprints. God gave me these gifts so that I can live a good life for myself and for others. When I have a realistic view of these gifts of God, neither denying them nor exaggerating them, I can operate out of a personal center, out of who I am, who I was meant to be.

Another aspect of my personal center is to understand my own ethnic and religious heritage. When I was on the staff of the Wilder Forest in Minnesota, a cross-cultural experiential education center, I was attempting to understand how to get people who come from different cultural settings and values to cocreate futures with people unlike themselves. At Wilder Forest we brought different cultures together by building villages with teenagers and their elders. In those villages the elders led the teenagers in rites of passage. We learned that if we helped young people find their cultural and spiritual roots, they would be more confident and open to work with people unlike themselves. We worked with each group to help them see and appreciate and appropriate what was unique about their culture. When they felt confident about their own cultural center, they were much less threatened by the "others."

At Wilder Forest I discovered that the deeper we understand and define ourselves by our center and not by our boundaries, the easier it is to work with people unlike us. We define ourselves by our boundaries when we look mainly at the barriers that separate us, at the ways we do things differently rather than at our core convictions.

Defining ourselves by our center is a way of inviting those different from us to tell their stories. Sometimes we make the mistake of looking only for what we hold in

common. Unfortunately, we tend to get the lowest common denominator so low that no one has much interest in it, whereas, if we go deep within our own stories, we invite others to tell their stories. We then find that those different from us give shape and color to our stories without threatening our center.

Four Dimensions of a Centered Life

Early Christianity was called the Way. The centered life is also a way, not a one-time, one-size-fits-all conversion, but an ongoing process. I begin, I fall back, I gain greater clarity. I keep coming back to the process.

I understand the centered life for each one of us as a life of belonging, identity, and meaning centered in Christ that is:

- Awakened to God's presence in our life
- Called to live our faith in every situation
- Set free to contribute our unique gifts to God's work in the world
- Nurtured and supported by a community of faith.

It is important to understand that these four dimensions of a centered life do not happen in a strict time sequence. We do not first get awakened and then move on to being called, and so on. The dimensions are all interrelated, and we keep cycling through them according to our unique patterns of growth.

In the coming chapters we will explore together each of these four dimensions of the centered life.

Chapter 2 will describe some ways in which we become awakened to God's presence in our lives. We will see how

God often comes to us in unlikely people, unlikely places, unlikely events. We will search together to see how God is active in our everyday lives, as well as in church. We will share stories of how other people were awakened to God's presence and through this found support and meaning.

Chapter 3 will explore the questions: What should I do with my life? How does God call me? How can I live my faith in the four domains of the workplace, home, community, and congregation?

Chapter 4 will discuss how the gospel sets us free from the forces that hold us in bondage. In this chapter you will find ways of identifying your dependable strengths and your values and how to connect them with what God is doing in the world.

In chapter 5 you will discover ways to find the nurture and support you need for a centered life. A centered life is not a solo operation. If we try to go it alone, we end up in cynicism and burnout. We need the support of others. We will see how the church—in the form of the local congregation as well as other expressions of church—can assist. What can you expect from a congregation? What can you do if your congregation is not now providing that support? What kinds of spiritual practices can give strength to your daily life? Where else can you find or create the supportive network you need to live a centered, meaningful life?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Reread the voices at the beginning of the chapter. With which one do you most identify?

2. Of the reasons for our divided life, how does each one affect you?

Rapid pace of change	Mobility
Specialization	Diversity
Compartmentalization	Unrealistic Expectations
Isolation	Climate of fear

What other causes of uncentered life have you identified?

3. In what ways does your congregation help you lead a centered life? Are there any ways it contributes to the fragmentation of your life?

4. Can you identify a time when the gospel came alive in your life?

5. For me, Bruce Sundberg was one person who embodied the gracious love of God. Who have been the people who have done that for you?

6. What feels like the center of your life? How would your life be different if you more clearly had God as the center of your life?

7. Your personal center includes the gifts God has given you—your unique self. We will be exploring this idea further, in chapters 3 and 4, but for now, what do you see as your major God-given gifts and abilities?

8. What is your ethnic heritage? In what ways does it influence who you are and what you may uniquely contribute?