**Steve Spilde:** Welcome. Today it is my pleasure to introduce Marcia Bentley. This is a pleasure for me because Marcia is a teammate. She serves as one of the leaders for the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program. Marcia is also a personal friend, and so it is a joy to talk to her. And beyond that, I’m excited because Marcia is one of the wisest and spiritually deep individuals that I know. She comes with a great deal of wisdom, and it’s a pleasure to make that wisdom available to a larger audience. Welcome, Marcia.

**Marcia Bentley:** Thank you, Steve. What a wonderful introduction.

**Steve:** As I often begin these conversations, I’m interested to hear you describe your family’s religious tradition.

**Marcia:** Good place to start. My family had a very strong Catholic identity. Both of my parents were born and raised Catholic, went to Catholic schools, never dreamed of marrying anyone other than another Catholic. That was the tradition we were raised in, so we went to Catholic schools. My parents were both very involved with the church. My mom was an organist. Both of my parents taught religious education, so it was really the culture of our family, an identity – even to the point, for instance, Sundays we would get up, have a big breakfast, go to Mass together. Then, Sunday afternoons … Sunday was a family day. We would do thing together. My dad owned a business, so he was busy six days a week. But on Sunday, he would spend time with us, and [those were] some of my most fun memories of childhood of coming home from Mass and deciding what we would do for the day, whether it would be something as simple as going to visit my grandparents or whether we’d go to the swimming pool or maybe parks, or even just sit around the living room and divide up the newspaper, and whoever got the comics first was the winner. It was just a friendly and happy and very nurturing upbringing in the Catholic Church.

**Steve:** It sounds very traditional, kind of like the image of what people would expect of a Catholic upbringing.

**Marcia:** Absolutely. And we lived in a neighborhood where so many of our neighbors were Catholic too, that it was just kind of reinforced in an unspoken kind of way. We were Catholics. We had Catholic friends, Catholic neighbors. It’s really its own subculture.

**Steve:** When you were young, how would you have described your image of God? There probably isn’t another word you would have used as a young person, but looking back at that age, how would you have described that image?

**Marcia:** Very much how God was taught to us in church and in school from a child’s viewpoint that God was this all-powerful man who lived in heaven, which was above the clouds. We would look up when we prayed to God. But for me, I guess a difference that I hear compared sometimes to other people’s perspective is that God was very loving. God was powerful, but God was loving as well. I think that was an underlying factor for my whole life, that I just trusted in this loving, wonderful God who was always with us.

**Steve:** What sort of situations would you feel particularly close to God at that stage in your life? Or do you have any particular memories of feeling particularly close to that sense of God?

**Marcia:** Good question. I guess I just felt close to God all the time. It was just this constant feeling of trust and love. But when I was a young child, I don’t remember this, but I was told that I used to write letters to God and then hide them under my bed because I knew God could see everywhere. So God would read those letters under my bed and no one else would find those. But when you talk about a particular experience, when I was in high school, it was during Lent and there was a tradition in the church where, on Holy Thursday, families would sign up to come to church all night long for a particular hour – kind of like the Hour of Perpetual Adoration that the sisters do. I just remember this one particular time where my dad signed us up for like three in the morning or something like that. We were all roused out of our sleep and had to get dressed and go to church and keep Jesus company for an hour in the middle of the night. It was something new and kind of exciting, and you also had to make sure you didn’t fall asleep in church. I was the first one to walk outside after that experience. I walked out and it was still pretty cold weather, and it was just a clear night. After that wonderful feeling of peace of just being in silence and being close to Jesus, walking outside church and looking up at the sky and seeing these stars, I just had this moment of connection with everything. At the time, I don’t know that I called that “God,” but looking back on it, I would call that just a real experience of being one with God, which was awesome.

**Steve:** The word that comes to mind as I listen to that story is “transcendence.”

**Marcia:** That was the first time I remembered feeling like that, so I think kind of on the bridge between childhood and early adulthood, it was just a difference experience and feeling of God, and one I still remember all these decades later.

**Steve:** I know as you got older, at some point you moved away from the church. How would you describe that transition?

**Marcia:** When I was in college, I was a really excellent student and people were always saying, “You can do whatever you want in life.” I thought about that, but what I kept hearing was, “I can be anything that I want, except I can’t be an astronaut and I can’t be a priest.” It’s not that I wanted to be either one of those things, but there was this limitation that was right there. I was a woman – I was a girl, actually, at the time – but being female, those were routes that were not open to me. And the hypocrisy of that just bothered me. It seemed to me that my church was telling me that all of us were created equal and that God loved us equally, and that hypocrisy just bothered me. So at that age especially, you’re so dualistic. You see everything in black and white, right or wrong, left or right. It seemed to be there was only one thing that I could do: I had to stop going to church. So I stopped going to church because of being bothered by that whole concept. But I still loved God, and I couldn’t really explain the discrepancy between those two things. I just knew that I wanted to know more about God, so what I started doing instead was studying other religions, and that was not at all unusual in the 1970s. I studied Native American religions and I studied Eastern religions, especially Buddhism. I was particularly drawn to meditation. I pursued it from an intellectual viewpoint rather than experiential, so I was trying to know more and more about God and not really ever joining those other religions – just learning about them.

Finally, it came to a point where in my marriage … This was several years later, and my husband and I were going through a particularly difficult time in life, as people do, and a difficult time in our marriage. My husband had also been raised Catholic and had also stopped going to church the same time I did; we were partners in that. One Sunday morning, he just said to me, “I’d really like to go to Mass today. Will you come with me?” It had been several years since we had been to church. Instead of making a flippant remark or being sarcastic about it, I just listened to what he was saying, and I didn’t know what was underlying that need, but I said, “Yes, I’ll go to church with you.” We went to a Mass; it was during Lent. We went to the Cathedral of St. Paul, which seats about 3,000 people. We were sitting in the pew, the priest got up and gave his homily, and honestly, it was like he was talking directly to George and me. The message that he had for us was so perfect for that day and that time in our lives that we just looked at each other and we said, “We need to return to church. This is exactly what we’ve been missing.” We rejoined the church that week, and again, it was a major change in our spirituality to just come back to where we had both been raised.

It’s interesting, because something that always came back to me during that period of being away from the church was something the Dalai Lama said. He said something similar to, “Dig one well, and dig it deep.” And I recognized that as I was studying other religions, I was doing it from a distance. I wasn’t at all digging a well and digging it deep. I realized that going back to the religion of my childhood where I did have deep roots was one that made the most sense for me. George and I rejoined the Catholic Church and just continued from there.

**Steve:** I know you to be an introvert. Is it fair to call you a strong introvert?

**Marcia:** Yes.

**Steve:** I also know that Centering Prayer is a really important part of your spirituality. I’m interested … That search, the study of Buddhism, the study of meditation … There were tools that you hadn’t found in your own tradition that you knew you needed, and you found those in other traditions. But then you kind of worked your way back into the church and brought those with you. Could you describe that journey to find the Centering Prayer?

**Marcia:** Sure. Meditation was interesting for me. I tried it a little bit, but didn’t stay with it back in those days. But still, it had caught my interest. Sometime later, maybe in the late 90s or so, I was working in a sales position and found myself to be quite anxious and went to see a counselor about that. She said, “Have you ever tried meditation?” I thought, “That would be a really good thing,” so, again, I started meditation, but didn’t keep it up. I was just doing it by myself; I probably did it for a couple weeks and didn’t keep going. Then, in the early 2000s I started seeing a spiritual director because I thought it sounded like a really cool thing to do. When I asked the spiritual director the very first time we met, “Are there any books that you could recommend, because I am an avid reader?” He said, “Read anything by Thomas Merton or Thomas Keating, and you will love it.” I thought, “OK, those are names that are pretty easy to remember.” I was passing by a bookstore the next day. I went inside just to see if I could find a book by either one of those authors, and there on the display was a book by Thomas Keating called “Introduction to Love.” I thought, “How can you go wrong with a title like that?” “Introduction to Love” sounded awesome. I bought the book without even opening it. I brought it home and opened it up, and it was all about Centering Prayer. I said, “You know what? This meditation keeps coming back. I think there’s a pattern here that I need to listen to.” So I started very seriously doing Centering Prayer back then, and have remained a practitioner ever since then.

**Steve:** For those who don’t know what Centering Prayer is, and particularly are not familiar with Thomas Keating, could you tell us a bit about that?

**Marcia:** Centering Prayer is a Christian form of meditation. What most people don’t know is that Christians meditated throughout Christianity’s history, but it was dropped maybe 400 or 500 years ago for a number of reasons. Part of the reason was that the churches wanted to be able to assert more control over all of these different influences that were affecting its members. And so for whatever reason, meditation went out of existence in Christianity. Back in the 1960s and the 1970s, a lot of Christians were leaving Christianity and moving over to Buddhism because they wanted to be able to meditate. Thomas Keating was an abbot of a Trappist monastery in Massachusetts, and he noticed this crowd of people leaving Christianity. And he said, “That’s crazy. Meditation has been a huge part of Christianity from the beginning.” So he and his associates went about trying to put together a modern method of meditation that would work for Christians, where Eastern religions are more about paying attention to your breath or to atone or something like that. Centering Prayer is about paying attention to the fact that God is within us, and it’s just centering on God’s presence and truly listening to the silence. So it is, again, a very unique, Christian form of meditation. I think takes us to the same place, which is just a oneness with the world around us.

**Steve:** Can you describe how Centering Prayer has blessed your life?

**Marcia:** Centering Prayer has definitely blessed my life. At first, I was seeking some relief from anxiety, which it definitely brought me. But over the years, by just listening to the silence, it changes you. By making room for silence, by centering on God, by just ignoring your own ego and your own to-do lists and your own concerns for just a time and setting aside some time to just go into this place of silence and peace, it creates space inside of you. By doing it on a daily basis, you reinforce that space or you replenish that space inside of you. It just makes you, over time, a more patient, a more caring, a more listening individual because you’re able to just be able to stay in a gap without responding to everything or without reacting to everything right away. It just gives you this ability to stop and listen and make a decision about how you want to proceed.

**Steve:** You had mentioned your husband, George … And some of the things that stand out when I think about Marcia Bentley is, one, that you are a deep practitioner of Centering Prayer. And I also look to you as someone who really understands grief, and unfortunately has had many experiences with grief, including with George. Could you talk about that for a bit?

**Marcia:** I don’t think I’m any different from anybody else in terms of an early childhood. I lost my grandpa when I was 4, and it was just kind of confusing to me at the time. But I think my first experience with real deep grief was when I was 11. When I was 11 years old, I had just turned 11, and my mom had a baby. He was child number eight, and I was so excited about the birth of another child in our family that I convinced her to take me to the hospital when she went in to deliver. I was actually at the hospital, and unfortunately where all my mother’s other babies had all been healthy, this baby died soon after birth. That was my first experience with grieving. My aunt came and picked me up at the hospital; I had no idea what was going on. She took me to her house, which was close to the hospital. All the other kids in my family ended up being at my aunt’s house. Then my dad came from the hospital to break the news to us that my little brother had died. The first thing that struck me about that, Steve, was that when my dad entered the house, he was crying. I was 11, [and] I didn’t know men could cry. Of course, I had seen children cry, [and] I knew women cried, but I’d never seen a man cry, and that was the first thing that struck me: He was crying. He explained to us what had happened, and that things were going to be very difficult for my mom for quite some time, so we were going to have to be especially kind to her and patient, and to be obedient children. Most of his emphasis was on her. But after the death of the child – and we did have a graveside service for him – but after that, we just didn’t talk about him anymore, which was pretty normal for the time, I think. You just didn’t talk about the death; you just kept on going. Life just kept on going, and you just bore it.

Unfortunately, less than a year later another one of my brothers was killed in an accident. That’s a rare experience for anybody to experience loss like that. But the second death within one year was just devastating to my family. My brother was a sophomore in high school. He was out riding around with a bunch of kids. He was in the back of a jeep and it flipped over and it landed on him. There was just no chance he was going to make it from that. Dealing with that was so hard for everybody, but especially on my parents. My dad went into a deep depression, and I don’t think he ever really ever came out of it fully. We had been a very close and very loving family, and after that things were just never the same. Of course, you do adjust in time. But once again, what I learned was that in grief, you just don’t talk about it. You are sad in your own time [and] you deal with it your own time, but we don’t discuss this as a group because it would bring about sadness and tears, and there can’t be anything good in all of that, so grieving had a big effect on my childhood. And shortly after my second brother, Dennis, died, my dad decided that we needed to get out of the suburbs of Chicago. I think he felt that had a direct influence on my brother’s death, so he packed up the family and moved us to a rural area in southern Wisconsin. It was a loving thing he was trying to do. He was trying to protect his family, and I think that’s the way he saw he could best do that. But for us kids, it was another source of grieving because as kids, you process that somehow or other with your friends, and suddenly we were also ripped away from all our friends and moved to a different community. Of course we did make friends within time and things got more or less back to normal after a few years. But it was kind of grieving upon grieving upon grieving. That definitely affected my childhood.

I know you’re also referring to the death of my husband; my husband died 11 years ago. We met in college and we got along from absolutely the first day that we met. It was sort of love at first sight, partners in life. We just accompanied each other in everything, and it didn’t surprise anybody right after college when we chose to get married, so again, we really were partners in life. George became ill just a few years after we were married. He was diagnosed with chronic fatigue, and it would affect him now and then. He usually tried to keep it quiet, but I could always tell, of course. And so 30 years later when he developed leukemia, we thought it was just another incidence of chronic fatigue and didn’t seek medical help until it was too late. He went into a hospital on a Monday, was diagnosed with leukemia, and died on Thursday. Again, there was this unexpected death and just grieving. Having to grief and having to deal with not only the loss of the person who’d been my partner in life for over 30 years, but just also the shock of it [and] the unexpectedness, threw me into a cycle of just crushing, devastating grief. I met you probably a year after that. I was still amazingly affected by it. Being an introvert, I’m pretty quiet normally, anyway. It just put me in a place of silence probably for a couple of years, just trying to come back to life myself.

**Steve:** I know based on our personal relationship that because of George’s health issues, because you were working really hard, you didn’t have a big social network. The two of you were just very close in your primary social contact – is that correct?

**Marcia:** That is correct.

**Steve:** So when he died suddenly, not only is there the grief and the loss, but then you end up being very alone. Not only did you lose your beloved partner, but now you were very alone. Is it fair to say those two experiences are very connected, but yet they are distinct?

**Marcia:** Yes. That’s a very good insight, Steve. My husband was sick for over 20 years. Over those 20 years, it happened very gradually, but our social circle just decreased and decreased, mostly because we tended to have friends who liked to do things on an impromptu basis. They would say, “Let’s go do something,” and we would say, “You know what – George isn’t feeling well, so we can’t go tonight.” Or even if they planned things [and asked us], “Would you like to come over for dinner week?” [We would say], “Can you hold off and let you know closer to that date because George isn’t feeling well.” It wasn’t anything real overt. Just slowly over time our social circle did decrease. In addition to that, we moved to a home in the woods because it was very quiet and very peaceful, and it was just easier for him to operate in this very quiet environment. At the time when he died, I suddenly found myself living out in the woods by myself. It was actually a little bit scary. Also, I didn’t have any relatives in the area. We were living in the Twin Cities, and most of my family lived in Wisconsin or other places, so that isolation occurred – absolutely.

What I did to counter it was, for one thing I had a spiritual director, which was huge for me because I could go and process it with my spiritual director. The first time I went to see her after George’s death, I just sat there and cried the entire session. I just couldn’t even talk, and it was probably the most moving spiritual direction session I’ve ever had because she didn’t talk, either. She just sat and wept with me, and that was so comforting. I just felt so companioned and not pressured. It was a beautiful expression and gesture of love on the part of my spiritual director. But I started seeking out any kinds of sources that I could to deal with this grieving. That was a departure from the past in that I was going to face this and I was going to face it head-on, so I searched out everything. I joined some grief support groups. I started reading everything I could get my hands on. I started going to see a therapist to find out how I could deal with grieving. When I read some of these books about grieving, I actually contacted the authors and set up interviews with them so that I could speak with them about their experience with grief, and I just embraced it, really, with everything I had so that I could just survive, but also so that I could get to know every face of this grieving because it affects you on every level. It affects you emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, [and] physically. I was just learning it, and I was learning it pretty much on my own, so I wanted to engage partners as best I could for all their help.

**Steve:**  We were talking about Centering Prayer. How was that a resource to you on the grieving journey?

**Marcia:** I had joined a Centering Prayer group just a few months before George died, and before that I had always prayed on my own. I joined this group, and they were a huge part of my journey as well because when I let them know that George died, there was this instant understanding and compassion. In a Centering Prayer group, when you pray together in silence, it might sound kind of difficult to understand for anybody who hasn’t done this, but when you pray together in silence, you go to this place together of deep trust and compassion and love. So even though this group did not know me very well, they reached out to me in just amazing ways of support and love and kindness. That’s where it helped me a lot. But also, just in Centering Prayer, I was never angry at God for taking George. I know a lot of people when a close person dies, they strike out and they’re angry at God – and if they are, it’s good that they express that. I never had that anger. I had been accustomed to George being ill for a long time, and really, in a lot of ways I was grateful for him that he was no longer in that physical place of illness and pain. But Centering Prayer just brought me to a place where I could just rest, and I didn’t have any pressures about having to answer questions or perform or do anything. I could just rest with God. Centering Prayer just gave me a place of solace like no other place I experienced.

**Steve:** As I introduced you that you have many gifts and areas of expertise, one of those is being an excellent spiritual director. We have an opportunity to meet with participants in the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program. We meet in other ways to support each other in that ministry. How has the experience of being a spiritual director been a resource for you in your grieving journey? The reason I ask that question is that I know receiving spiritual direction is a great resource for spiritual growth. But more and more, I’m starting to realize that being a spiritual director can be a great resource for spiritual growth. What’s your reflection on that?

**Marcia:** That is lovely, as you know, because my husband had been ill, I worked in a position that really wasn’t well-suited to me because I could earn more money. And I did that so my husband wouldn’t feel bad about not being able to work. I went to work in sales, which, as a deep introvert, is very counterintuitive. One day when I was praying when my husband was still alive, I was saying, “Am I going to have to do a job I hate for my whole life?” Soon after that, I discovered a magazine that was talking about the ministry of spiritual direction. It was the first time I thought, “That is something that I can do.” I went to spiritual direction, [and] I worked with a spiritual director, but it had never occurred to me that I could become a spiritual director. So even before my husband died, I had applied to a school in the Twin Cities to prepare to be a spiritual director. His death changed those plans for a while, and I came to the Franciscan Center. Spiritual direction is such an amazing thing because it opens up places inside of us when we sit and we are a companion to someone else’s sacred stories. It never fails to amaze me when I sit with someone and listen to their story – and especially when it’s a story of grief – when I hear grief from a whole different perspective from my own, it helps me to understand the blessings that I had in my own grieving process.

It’s a two-way process, Steve, just from your question that’s kind of leading to another area. In Spiritual Direction, God has no limits. In Spiritual Direction when we listen to the Spirit in our sessions, I’m not only hearing things that I can help the other person open up about, but I’m hearing things that help me as well. It just never fails to amaze me how God works on so many levels all at the same time to show us all how much God loves us.

**Steve:**  That’s my sense. I learned so much about myself listening to other people because oftentimes I recognize my experience in their story before I’ve seen it in my own self. That would be my expectation as you sit with people in grief, that sometimes you learn about aspects of your own grief journey that you had never noticed, but then you see it in someone else and now it becomes obvious to you.

**Marcia:** Well said. And you kind of place it in that pattern and have a more broad picture of what it is that you went through. And not just grieving, of course, but every aspect of life. That’s one of the joys of being a spiritual director: just having the privilege of listening to these very sacred stories. People’s stories amaze me, especially when they come to trust you as a spiritual director, and they will go deeper and deeper and admit things that perhaps they’ve never been able to talk about before in their lives. It is such a sacred blessing to hear these stories and to live through them with the person and to be able to ask them questions about their own stories – things they haven’t thought about so they can place it in a better place in the pattern of their own life.

**Steve:**  Well said. It has been being connected with the Franciscan Spirituality Center has been one of the great blessings of my life. And one of the reasons for that is I’ve been blessed to meet some amazing people. You are very high on that list, Marcia, so thank you for joining me today.

**Marcia:** You are most welcome, Steve. And you know that that goes both ways.