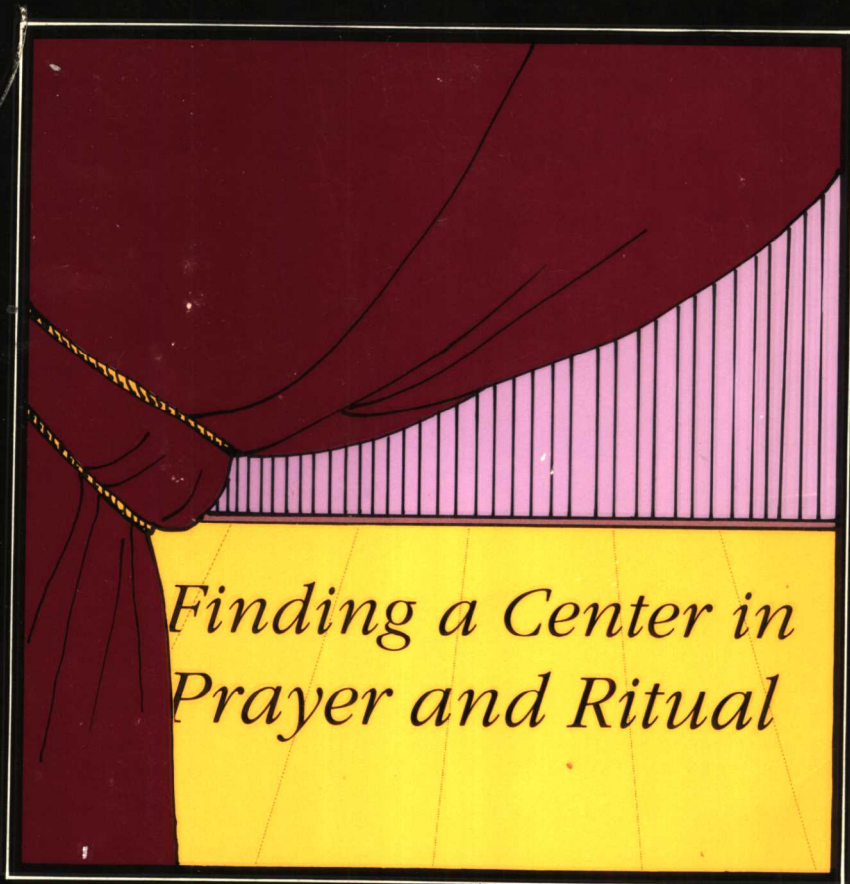


# THE INNER STAGE



James Roose~Evans

Director and Author of the Broadway Play, 84 Charing Cross Road,

# The Inner Stage



*Finding a Center  
in Prayer and Ritual*

*James Roose-Evans*

**COWLEY PUBLICATIONS**  
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This book is dedicated in loving memory  
of my first teacher  
Franz Elkish, MD  
to  
Meinrad Craighead  
who, as a member of the community at Stanbrook Abbey  
gave so richly of her friendship and prayer  
and  
The Rt. Rev. Jerome Hodkinson, OSB,  
whose friendship and prayers have sustained me  
over thirty years,  
while it was in the chapel of St Benedict at Belmont Abbey that  
there came the command, 'Write your book.'

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*Table of Contents*  
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**PROLOGUE**

**ACT ONE: THE TRAVELLER**

Finding the Centre	7
The Voyage Out	25
The Return Journey	36
An Urgent Presence	56

**INTERMISSION** 77

**ACT TWO: THE MAP**

A Journey of the Spirit	81
Posture	90
Breathing	97
The Word	102
Practice	107

**INTERMISSION** 121

**ACT THREE: THE JOURNEYING**

Day 1 Place	125
Day 2 Underground River	128
Day 3 Light	132
Day 4 Watching	134
Day 5 Inspiring	136
Day 6 A Prayer	139
Day 7 Caring	141
Day 8 Ladder	143

Day 9	Faces of God	147
Day 10	Opening	150
Day 11	Falling	153
Day 12	Weeding	154
Day 13	Garden	155
Day 14	Doors	158
Day 15	Lazarus	162
Day 16	Threshold	165
Day 17	Encountering	167
Day 18	Looking	169
Day 19	Changing	172
Day 20	Words	175
Day 21	The Lonely Space	179
Day 22	Frontier	183
Day 23	Talking to God	187
Day 24	Intercession	190
Day 25	Angels	193
Day 26	All Saints	196
Day 27	Tree	199
Day 28	Becoming	201
Day 29	Seeing	204
Day 30	The Flame	207
Day 31	The Fire	209
<b>AFTER THE PERFORMANCE</b>		<b>211</b>
Glossary of terms		213

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James Roose-Evans





## *Prologue*

In the early 1960s, shortly after founding the Hampstead Theatre, I was asked as a layman to do a series of *Epilogues* for television on the subject of prayer. Previous to this I had been host of a weekly programme for teenagers presented by the Churches, entitled *Sunday Break*. Then, in 1970, over a period of several months I wrote a short weekly column for *The Church Times* on meditation. The response revealed that there were many Christians trying to learn a form of meditation suitable to their needs and religious perspective. Slowly, over the years, in the midst of a full and active life in theatre, as artistic director of the Hampstead Theatre, then freelance director and writer, this book has grown. On St David's Day 1981 I was given the diaconate at Glasshampton Monastery in Worcestershire by the Bishop of Hereford, the Rt Rev. John Easthaugh. Four months later I was ordained a non-stipendiary priest in Hereford Cathedral. I continue to work in the theatre, write books, lead workshops and serve when needed in a public capacity as priest, be this in Herefordshire, London, New York or Colorado – wherever, in fact, my work takes me.

This book is in three sections. The first, *The Traveller*, offers a glimpse of the traveller himself, but no more than a glimpse for this is not intended to be an autobiography. The middle section, *The Map*, is an account of the practice of wordless prayer to which I was led. It describes a *bhakti* form of prayer. There are many ways of praying, but I can only speak of what I know. *Bhakti* means prayer of the heart, the simple response of the inner self to the Divine Self. The third and final section, *The Journeying*,

represents a series of reflections while journeying with the map, one for each day of the month. Prayer can only be crept up on slowly, and so it seemed good to balance the concentrated instruction of the middle section with a more leisurely conversation.

It is a book aimed at those Christians who have moved beyond a rote Christianity which basically emphasizes 'morality' issues, and who feel drawn to contemplative prayer and/or meditation as a way of finding a spiritual centre to their lives, and are looking for guidance; for the many Christians who are taught virtually nothing about contemplative prayer in the Church today and who are struggling, intuitively, very much on their own as I was, to find a deeper level of prayer. Finally, it is for those seekers after truth who find it difficult to relate to existing forms of Christianity. Many people today, while sympathetic to the Church and the ancient truths that it teaches and represents, nevertheless find that many of these truths are being taught more effectively outside the institutional churches. There is a gap widening between religion and spirituality and there is an urgent need for bridges to be built. It is to provide one such bridge that this book has been written.

## ACT ONE:      The Traveller

Make me to see and hear that I may know  
This journey and the place towards which I go;  
For a beginning and an end are mine  
Surely, and have their sign  
Which I and all in the earth and heavens show.  
Teach me to know.

If I could truly know that I do know  
This, and the foreshower of this show,  
Who is myself, for plot and scene are mine,  
They say, and the world my sign,  
Man, earth, and heaven, co-patterned so and so –  
If I could know.

Edwin Muir  
*Collected Poems*



# 1

## *Finding the Centre*

If I pass an enclosed garden with a gate or door in the wall, I love to open it and peer inside. If there is no gate I may jump up and, clinging to the wall, look over into the garden on the other side. I am not envious of other people's gardens, but I like to know that they are there. Under the Gardens of England scheme many individuals open up their gardens for a few days each year in order to share them with the public, while the National Trust often opens its gardens for the whole year.

We may not have a garden and may have no intention of starting one, not even a window box; yet we are enriched by the experience of walking in other people's gardens. We are enriched just by knowing that they are there as different ways of living. So it is with this book which, in a much smaller form, was originally printed privately and anonymously and shared with a few people. Now it is being opened to the public in general. Much of it is written in a practical way because prayer, like gardening, is a very practical business. I do not assume that every reader is going to start praying, any more than the average visitor to a National Trust garden is intending to start a garden. However, among the thousands who visit those gardens you will often come across someone peering at a plant and its metal tag, scribbling the name on the back of an envelope, even buying a specimen from the garden shop. That person will return home bearing a memory of that visit, which is then firmly planted in his or her own soil. Sometimes, even, rounding the corner of a yew hedge at Powis Castle, I have often surprised some genteel lady discreetly taking a cutting with a pair of nail scissors, popping it into some rooting

powder – conveniently kept in a pill box – then placing it inside a plastic bag and dropping that into her handbag. In one way or another these cuttings, like ideas, will reappear years hence as bushes, plants or trees in other gardens. Hopefully, in the same way, this book may provide the reader who already meditates or prays with fresh cuttings; or it may encourage someone to start their own interior garden.

There will be those who, reading this, will ask how a man of the theatre comes to be writing a book on meditation or contemplative prayer. After all, theatre is one of the toughest and most egocentric of professions. Recently, in an interview from Hollywood, the actress Helen Mirren remarked, 'As an actress you've got to look at "I", to learn to be unafraid of your own horrible ego. Americans are totally about "I".' Theatre people are not exactly humble and they do tend to enjoy the limelight a good deal. In the media they often receive what to many must seem an inordinate amount of attention. Then, too, the life of someone in show business can appear to the outsider as highly exotic, full of variety and surprise, unlike the duller, more predictable life patterns of most people. What the public does not see, of course, are the long periods of unemployment when no work comes or, if it does, is unsuitable. It is a profession full of insecurities and uncertainties, without logic. Most people who do a job well expect continuing promotion, but in show business it is not like that at all. Actors, directors and designers, writers too, rise and fall with alarming rapidity, often for no discernible reason; a highly esteemed actor, with a family to support, can find himself on the poverty line – even below it – while a less able actor who happens to have a good year with a few commercials can earn more than the Prime Minister. In England and the USA the majority are unemployed for the greater part of each year. A writer can always write, and a painter can always paint, but actors, dancers, directors and designers can only work if someone employs them.

For those of us who work in show business it is an itinerant and uncertain life, and in order to survive we have to find a centre within our self. That centre, quite obviously, cannot be solely our work. Of course, this is increasingly true of everyone. Today it is no longer enough to say: I am an actor, a miner, a builder, a farm

labourer, a nurse. As automation takes over so many jobs, the changing pattern of our society is forcing us all to find an identity that lies deeper, and to realize that work is not necessarily equated with our job. Even in family situations, as rôles are reversed, where Dad becomes Mum, and Mum goes out to work, the issues of identity are becoming increasingly complex. Yet if we can measure up to the challenge there is an unique opportunity here for growth, both in ourselves as individuals and as a society. The changing social and economic patterns are forcing us to find new answers to the questions: Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going?

When I was auditioning actors for my adaptation of Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* I received over five hundred letters from actors wanting to be in the production. In the end I selected some three hundred and gave each a fifteen minute audition, a process which took three weeks, and out of that number seven were selected. For the thousands waiting for a chance to act, only a few make it. As Cassie sings in the musical *A Chorus Line*, 'I am a dancer. Let me dance for you. Let me try or I die!' Watching that film it struck me forcibly that showbiz is very much a metaphor for life itself, and there is one scene in the show which illustrates this. Cassie, who is a solo dancer of quality but has been out of work for two years, insists on being auditioned for the chorus line of the brilliant but ruthless choreographer's new show. He can't believe that she is serious.

'Is that what you really want?' he asks. 'To be in the chorus line?'

She replies, 'That's where I belong.'

'But you're *special!*' he retorts, at which she cries out passionately, pointing to the other dancers on the stage, '*Everyone* up there is special!'

Unless we believe that each one of us is special, then life indeed is no more than a series of meaningless auditions for a remote and uncaring director. Unless we can find meaning and significance in our lives we shall be trapped in a ceaseless round of meaningless activity. Each one of us has to find a centre within.

The way to that centre is hard. All legends and fairy stories that speak of the heroine or hero setting forth on a quest tell the same tale. Many people never even set out on their own individual



quest or, if they do, become quickly trapped by their anger, prejudice and personal blocks. It is not surprising that in the 1960s and 1970s many people were drawn into encounter and similar therapy groups, aware of a hunger for something that they could not find in their religion, school, college – even their own family. This was especially true in America, where there was, and still is, a hunger for relationships which can be real and close, in which feelings and emotions are spontaneously expressed without first being carefully censored or bottled up; where deep experiences, whether of joy or grief, are capable of being shared; where an individual can be both known and accepted, and know that further growth is possible. However, in the 1980s has come an awareness that, valuable and enriching as such encounters can be, there is yet more – the realization as an American psychiatrist has recently observed, that the basic urge of the human being is to worship. ‘This urge is deeper than the sex urge. It is experienced from the infant stage to the very aged. The human must look to something greater than he is, something in which he can feel secure because he believes it to be right, changeless, wise, powerful, eternal.’ He must have such a power to trust or he does not have the urge to progress. To cut off this need to worship is like cutting off the main root of a tree.

I am convinced that many more people feel this need to worship than is perhaps admitted or even comprehended, but they do not know what to do with it. The form of public worship that is to be found in many churches, chapels, synagogues and temples alienates them. Some respond to such ceremonies and ritual, finding in them the roots of their own buried tradition; but many can find no way of relating to them, and so are left with this desire to worship and nowhere to go. As a senior cardinal at the Synod of Bishops in Rome in November 1985 observed, ‘People are searching for the sacred in their lives – but outside the Church.’ As a culture we are ritually out of phase. We are, if at all, dragooned into rituals (even fraternity rituals) that mean little or nothing to us, yet when we need the symbolic deepening of an important experience we somehow lack the necessary gestures and images. No wonder, says Harvey Cox, the American theologian, that we undergo identity crises until we die.

Worship begins, however, as an interior activity, and that is