

Pray as you can: Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

"I don't know how to do this," I said to the nothingness. The Holy Spirit took it from there.

by [Rachel M. Srubas](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26).

I was raised in a middle-class, suburban family for whom religion, like sex, was a taboo topic. My Uncle Paul, a monastic known as Brother Leo, would join us each year for Thanksgiving dinner, but we never offered grace for the meal. Uncle Paul was an oddity in his black suit and drab, community-owned sedan. But I sensed that spiritually he was on to something—as were my girlfriends, I thought, because they were allowed to go to Sunday school, or CCD class on Wednesday afternoons, or temple on Saturday mornings.

I was an imaginative kid. Mrs. Haiseman, my fourth-grade teacher, often sent me home with a cardboard-and-glitter plaque that declared, "I'm a Creative Writer!" I would fashion Christmas collages for my family out of holiday cards saved from previous years. I knew better than to include nativity scenes in my artworks, and stuck with bright renderings of holly, ivy, snowdrifts and Santa.

Once, coming upon a card emblazoned in golden ink with the Lord's Prayer, I carefully cut out the prayer and slipped it between the pages of another forbidden text, *The Facts of Life and Love*, a mildewed book that had belonged to my mother's parents.

It was a perplexing season in my life. Reading in secret, I would learn that undergarments were *never* an appropriate gift for a gentleman to give a young lady. I memorized the mysterious words, "Hallowed be thy name." I knew that I did not know how to pray, but I learned the entire Lord's Prayer by heart and repeated it nightly, waiting for something to happen. Eventually, puberty overtook me, but that hardly seemed like an answer to prayer.

A decade later, when I was a college English major and burgeoning hipster poet, I fell in love with a classmate, a gentleman who, in the most timely and tasteful manner, gave me some undergarments as a gift. He also went to church on Sundays. I had long since given up on the God who had not answered my childhood prayers, and I mocked my boyfriend's faith. I was fond of quoting punk rock icon Patti Smith: "Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine." My boyfriend asked me to knock it off.

I was jealous of his love for Jesus, and even more of Jesus' love for him. Alone one afternoon, I put my head in my hands and said to the nothingness, "I don't know how to do this. Teach me to pray." The Holy Spirit took it from there, interceding on my behalf with sighs too deep for words.

Yet for the next several years, through my baptism, my church wedding (yes, to the Christian who gives gifts of underwear), through my continued efforts to write poetry, and even during my first bout of seminary education, I went about my life tense with the secret that I did not know how to pray as I ought. In my purse I carried a paperback book with a title borrowed from Dom John Chapman: *Pray as You Can, Not as You Can't*. What I really did not know was that my spiritual ignorance, my inexpert yearning for God, was a hidden treasure, a pinch of yeast leavening my life.

One muggy July afternoon, in a state of spiritual frustration, I took a cooling midday shower. Along with the flowing water, I felt the Spirit descend on me, and I began to understand how to pray. Not in sighs too deep for words, but in words born of silence and scripture—and obedience, which means listening.

I opened my Bible and it spoke to me. I wrote about two dozen prayers in as many days, lucid and heartfelt, and the people of my home church distributed them to the congregation in photocopied booklets. This was not divine dictation or ecstatic writing; I was neither Muhammad nor Margery Kempe. But the experience echoes in my memory with Jesus' words: "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

What was new to me—listening with the ear of the heart (as St. Benedict puts it) to sacred texts until they lead the listener to prayer—was actually very old. Call it *lectio divina*, prayerful reading or breaking open the word. It is a practice older even than

St. Benedict, who, along with St. Paul, has taught me much about prayer.

I've learned that we underestimate the Spirit's power to help us in our weakness. Prayer begins not with competence but with an earache—an ache in the ear of the heart. And prayer may take as many forms as there are pray-ers. Pray as you can, but never think you've got it down cold. What would we do if we truly prayed as we ought? Sweat blood? Cry Abba? Sing psalms and spiritual songs? All of this, without ceasing?

Me, I read and listen, pray and write. No, I do not know fully how to pray as I ought. But I trust that the Spirit, who deeply sighs where words leave off, intercedes for me—and for you, and for all creation. And that is enough.