

Natural prayers

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 2, 2001](#) issue

In the long history of this column, I have never received so much positive and helpful correspondence as I did in response to the one (January 24) that incidentally mentioned how I had cherished but somehow lost David Head's *He Sent Leanness: A Book of Prayers for the Natural Man*. When I wrote I thought that Head was Anglican. He is or was, it turns out, Methodist. I did not even remember his name, and he, poor person, was born too soon to stop saying "man" when he meant "person." (But note below, he did sometimes refer to God as "parent.")

Scores of readers came to the rescue. A few chided me for not having known about search engines and Web sites that would have guided me to used copies of the book, first published by Epworth Press in England and Macmillan in the U.S. in 1959. Not a few offered to send me their cherished copies, and I accepted the spontaneous one mailed me by William W. Young, who noted that he had spent \$1.25 for it.

The book is not republishable; the lingo is too Anglo; the references were so relevant then that they are hopelessly dated now. But maybe a witty, prayerful updater could do for the new millennium a fatter version "inspired by" *He Sent Leanness*.

The great J. B. Phillips blurbed this as a "most amusing little book" that "is far more than that": "While it makes us laugh it exposes with uncanny insight many of our secret wishes and unexpressed desires." Phillips hoped we would "think about the pages of this stimulating exposure of the hypocrite in us all." It's a book that causes cringing, rather than howling laughter. Some of those who wrote me mentioned that their congregations had not been receptive to Head's irony in 1959. They might not yet be so today.

But enough talking *about* the book. Let's sample it:

"O Lord, so long as the weather is reasonably fine, so long as I have no visitors, so long as nobody asks me to do any work, so long as I can sit in the back pew but one on the left, so long . . . as they don't choose hymns I don't know, . . . so long as I can get home in time for the play, I will honour Thee with my presence at Church

whenever I feel like it.”

Or: “I pray for the relations with whom I have been encumbered. Thou knowest they are a pretty rum lot. I should hardly have chosen a single one of them. Help me to find some good in them, however difficult a job that may be. Don’t let me see too much of any of them. Let the occasional duty visits be brief and bearable. Thou understandest that I have no time to write to them, but let the expensive and unavoidable Christmas card express my sincere good wishes.”

And: “Benevolent easy-going Father: we have occasionally been guilty of errors of judgment. We have lived under the deprivations of heredity and the disadvantages of environment. We have sometimes failed to act in accordance with common sense. We have done the best we could in the circumstances; and have been careful not to ignore the common standards of decency; and we are glad to think that we are fairly normal. Do thou, O Lord, deal lightly with our infrequent lapses. Be thy own sweet Self with those who admit they are not perfect, according to the unlimited tolerance which we have a right to expect from thee. And grant as an indulgent Parent that we may hereafter continue to live a harmless and happy life and keep our self-respect.

“We pray that our statesmen may do everything they can to promote peace, so long as our own national history and honour and pride and prosperity and superiority and sovereignty are maintained; *You can do all things, O God.*”