

Doubts about prayer: Between action and contemplation

by [Christian Wiman](#) in the [September 7, 2010](#) issue



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I have never felt comfortable praying. I almost feel I should put the word in quotes, as I'm never quite sure that what I do deserves the name. I have a little litany of stations through which I move—thank you, help me, be with, forgive—but mostly I simply (simply!) try and subject myself to the possibility of God. I address God *as if*.

"We must believe in the real God in every way," says Simone Weil, "except that he does not exist, for we have not reached the point where he might exist." I understand this to mean not that if we achieve some state worthy of God, he will pop into being like a genie, but that devotion to God, for modern believers, inevitably means learning to inhabit, rather than simply trumping with dogma or literal scripture, those elements of our existence that seem inimical to his: limitedness, contingency, suffering, death.

Contemporary people whose lives are marked by a searching, scorching spiritual focus—whether they are conflicted believers, God-haunted agnostics or even the neoatheists whose very avidity gives them away—tend to be obsessed by *whether* God exists. What Weil is saying is that this is—not beside the point, exactly, but a

misdirection: God exists apart from our notions of what it means to exist, and there is a sense in which our most pressing existential question has to be outgrown before it can be answered.

Religion has always emerged at the edge of what humans know. As that edge has been pushed farther and farther into the unknown, as our reach has extended to space and the atom and even the chemistry of our own needs and desires, some people have assumed that existence is, in the end, knowable. This not only contravenes centuries of human experience, duplicating the hubris that has doomed us so many times in the past, but, more crucially, it violates, even desecrates, the most intimate, ultimate experiences of our own lives.

There are moments in every life when one is overwhelmed—in a positive sense, though there may very well be suffering—by reality or, more accurately, overwhelmed by reality spilling its boundaries. It can happen when you fall in love or, once the initial nullifying horror subsides, when the world returns sharper and starker after a dire diagnosis. It can happen when eternity, in the form of your first child, comes crying bloody and impossibly beloved into time. It can even happen—though much less dramatically and obviously, at least for me, at least so far—in prayer. At such moments it is not only as if we were suddenly perceiving something in reality we had not perceived before, but as if we ourselves were being perceived. It is as if the interstellar spaces, and all the random atoms into which we will one day vanish, turned a kind of incomprehensible but utterly comprehending attention toward us. It is as if oblivion whispered in our ears.

This is one aspect of God's nature, the infinite inhering in the specific, atomic (in every sense of that word) insights that disclose our beings and situate us in something larger than ourselves, even as they cast us back into brute reality—the daily responsibilities of caring for a child or the modulations of marriage, the terror and tedium of ongoing illness, or simply the hollow sound of your own voice attempting to pray. I suppose it is possible to knit a kind of spiritual life together out of these moments, for they do restore one's links to and with the Earth; they do propel one forward into time and connections. For me, though, there is something too inchoate and sporadic to such a spiritual life: a devotion that hinges only on these rare intensities begins to seem, for me, like a discipline of memory. An essential discipline, yes, but one that makes Being seem mostly in abeyance and life a long wait for God, who is knowable only in emotional extremity, and only then by a sort of tender oblivion.

Which brings me back to the quote from Weil. If part of what she encourages is implicit and passive, a letting go of our mind's most developed capacities in order to realize our mind's further capacities, another part—indeed the *first* part—is explicit and all action: "We must believe in the real God in every way." There are many ways to interpret this, of course, and religious factions will be fighting to the end of days over who exactly the "real God" is. For Weil, though, one thing is clear: to believe in God is a practical matter, faith a physical act renewed (or not) at every moment. For a Christian—which Weil was, although poignantly (tellingly?) she could never quite bring herself to be baptized and formally enter the church—this means believing in a God who is not apart from matter (or not merely that) but part of it, a God who does not simply enjoin us to participate fully in life, and specifically in the relationships within our lives, but a God who inheres wholly within those relationships.

For that is another aspect of God's nature, which is human nature, embodied in, and suffered through, Christ:

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his,  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

—*Gerard Manley Hopkins*

For all the intensity of our meditative moments, for all the necessity of "mystical" experiences that can never quite be translated into the terms of ordinary life, until our faith is rooted in and inextricable from our daily reality, then those moments and experiences are as likely to wreck as to rescue us, because we cannot live up to them: they indict the mildness with which we drift through our days. The greatest mystery of those moments in our lives is that, in a way, there is no mystery: that is to say, the immense, ungraspable, mystical reality that overwhelms us is also the concrete, suffering, sometimes all-too-touchable face right in front of our eyes.

One day when I had gone to a little chapel near my office at lunchtime and was once more praying while wondering how and why and to whom I prayed, a man came in and eased into the pew directly across the aisle from me. As we were the only two people there, his choice of where to sit seemed odd—and irritating. Within a couple of minutes all thought of God was gone into the man's constant movements and his elaborate sighs, and when I finally rose in exasperation he stood immediately to face me. He had the sandblasted look of long poverty, the skeletal clarity of long addiction, and that vaguely aggressive abasement that truly tests the nature of

one's charity. Very cunning, I noted, failing the test even as I opened my wallet: to stake out this little chapel, to prey upon the praying! For days it nagged at me—not him, but it, the situation—which, I finally realized, was precisely the problem: how easily a fatal complacency seeps into even those acts we undertake as disciplines, and how comfortable we become with our own intellectual and spiritual discomfort. *Wondering how and why and to whom I prayed?* I felt almost as if God had been telling me, as if Christ were telling me (in church no less!), get off your mystified ass and *do* something.